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# THE NYMPH

E. DICKBERRY

AUTHOR OF  
"THE STORM OF LONDON"



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Dickbe





# THE NYMPH



# THE NYMPH

BY

F. DICKBERRY

Author of "The Storm of London"

Shines the past age, the next with hope is seen,  
To-day unnoted poorly slinks between,  
Future or Past, no richer secret holds,  
O friendless Present than thy bosom folds.

EMERSON.

K.

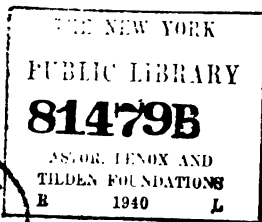
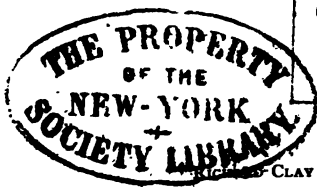
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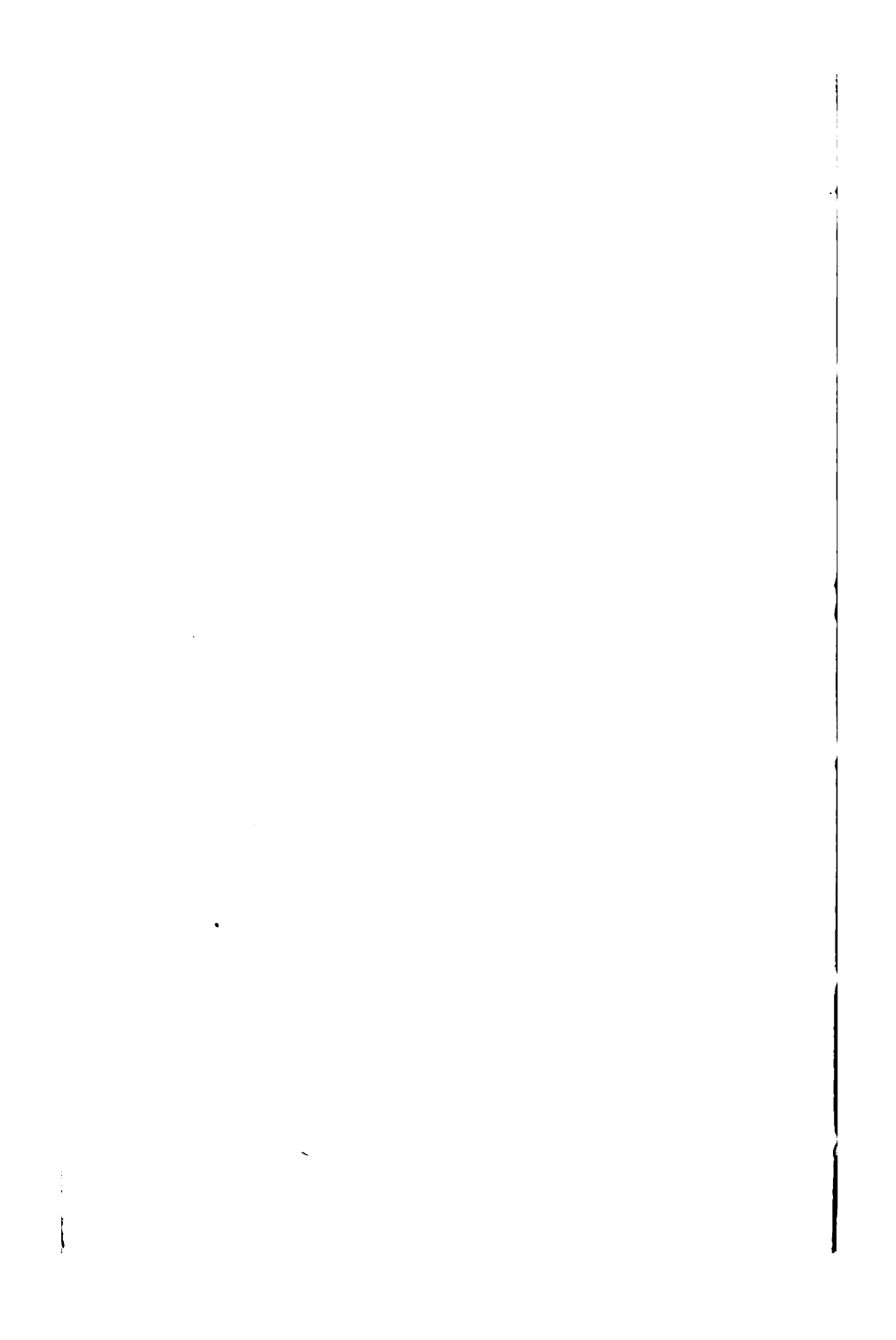
TO  
THE MEMORY  
OF  
MY MOTHER

Run 125



# THE NYMPH





# THE NYMPH

## CHAPTER I

"WELL, Monsieur le Curé, have you had a tolerably good winter?" inquired the Marquis de Savigny, when they were all seated round the dinner-table at Crespy-sur-Roc, one lovely July evening.

"Not a bad one, Monsieur le Marquis," replied the Priest, after swallowing one or two spoonfuls of *consommé*, with that irritating smack of the lips habitual to underbred folks.

"Have the church fees been satisfactory?" asked the Comte de Laumel, dropping his eye-glass from his eye.

A deprecating smile flitted across the thick lips of the Curé.

"Have you lost any of your parishioners?" patronizingly asked the Dowager Marquise de Savigny.

"Only three deaths, Madame la Marquise, and one of them was a suicide." The young Priest checked a derisive smile. No one seated at this refined dinner-table could see any difference between a death and a suicide, as far as church fees were concerned, and they all wondered what hidden sense of humour prompted the hilarity of their good shepherd. A silence ensued, during which the guests busied themselves with the contents of their plates; whilst the servants paraded noiselessly round the table, pouring out wine, and helping the fish which had been caught that morning in the Loire.

"This certainly speaks for the healthiness of

Touraine, Monsieur le Curé," remarked the wife of the Marquis de Savigny.

"Is it true that the old Farm is let?" asked Edmond de Savigny, always anxious to know all the village news, as soon as they were installed at the Château.

"Quite true, Monsieur le Marquis; it is let to a young couple. The husband is an artist—they have been at the Farm more than five months."

"Artists! What are they? Musicians, painters, or writers?" The little Comtesse de Laumel flung her questions with vivacious curiosity at the immovable face of the Curé.

"He is a painter," replied the latter, after having emptied a glass of Bourgueil.

"What's his name?" Gaston de Laumel showed no interest in what would be the answer.

"Darlot—Jean Darlot. He paints landscapes . . . . I believe he has come here to paint the Loire under all its aspects," replied the Priest.

"D'you know that name . . . . Darlot?" The sprightly Comtesse de Laumel turned her piquant features towards her husband, who shrugged his shoulders and raised his eyebrows.

"I think I have seen the name in a *Salon* catalogue—I'm not quite sure, but I believe I have." The Marquis de Savigny had acquired a certain knowledge of painting in his frequent visits to Rome and Florence.

"And—the wife? . . . . I hope she is all that one could wish . . . . and the children too—if there are any?" asked the Dowager, seated at the head of the table. Eating very little, and drinking less, the old Marquise from her post at the head of the table observed all that was said and done, favouring each speaker, whether relations or strangers, with a keen scrutiny from her old eyes. But for the Curé's use she had a selection of phrases which she invariably served up, when at stated times he came to dine at the Château. It always had been a social obligation to

have him about once in every fortnight ; but in the present state of politics, when religion was threatened by a pack of scoundrels at the head of the Government, it had become a bounden duty, both as good Catholics and staunch Royalists to entertain him twice a week. But, although the Dowager welcomed the young Abbé at her table, she never honoured him with any of her witty sallies, or with her original views concerning modern society ; for she could not forget that, however much he was a son of the persecuted Church, he was, and ever would remain, the son of a peasant.

"They are honest people, Madame la Marquise," answered the Priest. "The husband works at his pictures as long as daylight lasts, and she looks after her home and her children . . . ah ! she is by no means idle ; I don't think any of our peasant women could boast of doing more than Madame Darlot ;" and once more silence descended upon this gathering of smart men and women. The picture called up by the Curé's remarks in the minds of the company was that of a couple of middle-class people, the husband a mere dauber, the wife fat and vulgar, engrossed in the management of her household and the upbringing of tiresome and dirty children.

"The children will, no doubt, be new recruits for the Catechism, Monsieur le Curé," added the Dowager, condescendingly.

"I do not know . . ." and the Priest accompanied these words by an awkward movement of the head.

"Anyhow, it will always bring four worshippers more to your Church," broke in dryly Edmond de Savigny. "It seems to me that your congregation grows less every year."

"The Darlot family is like so many of my peasants in not honouring me with their presence at Divine Service."

"Maybe they are Protestants," said Monsieur de Savigny.

"Or . . . . Jews! . . . ." sneeringly put in the Comte de Laumel.

"I don't think they are," answered the Abbé, looking into his plate.

"At any rate, any kind of religion would be preferable to none," remarked the young Marquise de Savigny.

"I dare say they think, like our peasants, that work is in itself a prayer," said the Curé.

"One can admit that principle as far as peasants are concerned," broke in Edmond de Savigny. "We all know that agriculture has its pressing needs, and the man who thinks of his harvest before he does of his salvation, may be excused; no doubt God will judge him mercifully; but the man who professes a liberal art cannot claim exemption from his spiritual duties on the same plea. In the present day we are too often inclined to sacrifice the higher side of life to the exigencies of money-making."

"Bah! artists are all more or less in revolt against society, and devoid of any moral sense, but these in particular must be perfect reprobates." Gaston de Laumel having delivered this pronouncement, gazed reprovingly at the Curé. The latter was at a loss to understand what he had said to the detriment of the Darlots, and he felt awkward. It was always thus each time he dined at Crespy. He invariably said or did something which turned out to be wrong.

"I have never heard anything against Monsieur Darlot," said the Abbé. "Of course our peasants do not think much of the profession of artists, and if you were to ask their opinion, they would probably say that he was an idler—a loafer; for those who rise at four o'clock in the morning to till the soil it is impossible to grasp the idea that any man can earn his bread by painting views of the Loire."

"Yes . . . . oh! yes . . . . I know!" interrupted Gaston de Laumel in an impatient voice. He dreaded the long soliloquies of the Curé, and the mere idea

of listening to his psychological comments on the peasant's soul made him shudder.

"It must be very painful for you, Monsieur le Curé," said the young Marquise de Savigny, "to have these people as close neighbours, for the Farm is really part of the Church."

"The old Farm was originally the Monastery of Crespy," remarked Edmond, who was well acquainted with all the Church history of France.

"Could you not impress on these people that their conduct is a real scandal in the village?" once more ventured the young Marquise.

"After all, Madame, they are strangers; besides, it is against my principles to try to force any one to come to Church."

"But you visit them, do you not?" inquired Edmond de Savigny.

"Certainly. We met on the road, I believe, perhaps it was at the chemist's—I cannot tell."

"Well," interrupted the Marquis, "let us hope you will not live to rue the day when these recreants came to Crespy. I know that breed." He leaned forward over his plate and looked hard at the priest. "Rest assured of this, that an artist, at the start of his career, is always discontented, and therefore an anarchist at heart. When they become successful it is different. They pass from the garret to the mansion in the Champs Elysées with marvellous adaptability; and from being infuriated socialists, they develop into pompous landowners. Beware of an artist who aspires to the laurel wreath, and is climbing the Olympian heights."

"As far as I am concerned I have only known artists when they had reached the top of the tree," said Gaston.

"And those who remain as aspirants to the Grecian apogee need not attract our attention," summed up the Dowager. "I belong to an old period of society in which artists were only known by their works, and not by their sumptuous houses and

morbid eccentricities. In my youth, society was not renowned for its artistic bent, but it could vibrate sympathetically to the pages of our great poets, and admire the painting of the artists of my time."

"I must confess I prefer Degas to your stiff Ingres, and Verlaine's poems send cold shivers down my back." Little Comtesse de Laumel spoke in a whisper; she looked the essence of well-bred impertinence with her elbows on the table, holding her kittenish chin within her slender fingers.

"Ah! we all know what your tastes are, my dear cousin," retorted Edmond, "you also prefer modern-style furniture to the old Italian chests, and even to our elegant Louis XV. *marqueterie*." The Marquis's tastes were of the severest order in matters of intellect, as they were in the choice of furniture.

The Curé ate his strawberries in silence, and occasionally lifted his glass of Vouvray to his lips. He looked at it smilingly, and compared it to the amber rays of the setting sun reflected in his beloved river Loire; for the Curé of Crespy-le-Bourg was as poetical under his rough manner as he was proud and independent beneath his humdrum appearance. The conversation had become general, and they all seemed to forget the presence of their pastor, as each one had something to say about Mediæval chests, Louis XVI. consoles, Empire clocks, and even Liberty cosy corners.

"What are you reading at present, *mon enfant*?" inquired the Dowager, turning her face towards Gaston de Laumel. Like all very old people she had no scruple in interrupting any conversation that did not interest her; and introducing a subject more adapted to her taste.

"*Three Men*, by Maxim Gorky," answered Gaston.

"Novelists do not write books any longer—they make surgical experiments on human beings; therefore I never read a novel, since scissors and lancet have replaced pen and ink."

"A new book by Gyp has just come out, Grand-

mother ; that certainly will not be surgical," laughingly said Hélène de Laumel.

"Gyp ! whom you consider a smart chronicler of our modern world, makes her puppets kick up their heels in a social bazaar with as little fitness as Gorky, when he makes his tramps and rogues endorse the chlamys of Greek tragedy."

"But, novels are necessary. Besides, Gyp is amusing—and Gorky is weirdly fascinating," remarked Gaston de Laumel.

"Well said, my dear boy ; as long as you find Gyp amusing and Gorky fascinating you can read them without any detriment to your intellect. It is just because I find Gyp witless, and Gorky untrue to life, that I do not read their books. Were I, by ill chance, to read any, I should be tempted to believe in neither God nor the devil." After this harangue, which did not much affect her grandchildren, accustomed as they were to her outspoken speeches, the Dowager set to work to demolish a peach which the butler had just peeled for her.

The Curé, not liking to display his ignorance of the subject under discussion, and admonished by his pride to keep silence lest he should expose himself by some blunder, became more and more oppressed by self-consciousness. His face began to assume a sullen expression, whilst his restless movements showed constant traces of that lack of breeding which the Seminary education had been powerless to counteract. As he sat, a silent spectator of this discussion, the Priest's attention was attracted by a picture which hung over the sideboard. It was a portrait of the Dowager Marquise when a young woman. Instinctively he glanced from the portrait to the original—to the little weazened figure half-buried in the mahogany armchair. The old Marquise looked like some figure from a past age, some rare specimen of a bygone society. On her mobile countenance could be traced the whole gamut of the emotions, ranging from the deep notes of passion to the light strains of merry



pleasantry. The modest black cap neatly tied under her chin, and the plain black cashmere dress which sparingly enfolded her shrunken body, lent to her demeanour an austerity strongly in contrast with her Rabelaisian wit. The portrait was that of a young woman leaning against a white marble mantelpiece. The juvenile face tinged with sadness was framed in long chestnut curls, and a white rose was placed in her hair above the ear. The neck and arms were of a lovely contour, and the round waist and hips showed up to perfection in the tight bodice of *couleur de rose* satin. It was as difficult to see any connection between the blooming young woman depicted in the portrait and the shrunken figure at the head of the table, as it would be to recognize some beautiful melody of Mozart as it came wailing forth from a piccolo played by a blind beggar in the street.

When the Dowager thought the moment for leaving the dining-room had arrived, she laid her small hands on the table, and as she leaned her body forward and looked at her grandson opposite, every one rose from their seats. The Marquis de Savigny, going to his Grandmother's side, helped her out of her armchair into the bath-chair which the butler wheeled forward. Then the procession moved along the passage into the Dowager's drawing-room, where it was their custom to remain till ten o'clock. The Dowager's grandsons conversed upon various topics, political and local, whilst their wives, in subdued tones, discussed subjects of more interest to themselves. They were accustomed to speak of this drawing-room as of a place in which they experienced a foretaste of their future abode in the ancestral vault, for its atmosphere was both chilly and awe-inspiring.

The Curé, on the contrary, began to revive, first of all because he had got over the ordeal of dinner, further because his visit would soon be over.

"Have you read the article in the last number of the *Croix*, Monsieur le Curé?" inquired the Marquis as he sipped his coffee. He took a lively interest

in all ecclesiastical questions ; although he never had either the energy or the perseverance to enter the lists of political combatants, much to the disgust of his Grandmother.

"I never come across the *Croix*," meekly answered the Curé.

"You ought to read it," hurriedly said the Marquis ; "you are inclined to be tolerant ; and in these troubled times indulgence is a crime."

"I am afraid you will be ill-judged by our enemies, Monsieur le Curé," broke in Gaston de Laumel ; "we must beware of weakness and leniency, even if other Christian virtues have to sink in the fight." The Comte de Laumel, like his cousin, was ultramontane, although his temperament was less austere and his mind less narrow. He went to church regularly, but he preferred to leave the practice of the more stringent precepts of religion to others, and to feel free himself to choose his own way of life. He would have his sons brought up in a Jesuit college wherever that was to be found, were it to be as far off as Thibet, whilst he insisted upon sending his daughter abroad to seek the education only to be found in a convent ; but having given his children to God, as his ancestors had given theirs to their kings, he wiped his hands of all religious doctrines and proclaimed the doctrine of good living and of fair women to be the only one worth living for. Whenever the Curé dined at Crespy, the conversation veered round to the same topic : the Government was ruthlessly condemned for everything it did ; and the Clerical Party were invariably commended for all they said and did. The Curé was not always of the same way of thinking as his hosts. He often differed from them, partly perhaps because he was by nature contradictory ; but also because the exaggerated abuse of the Savignys offended his plebeian pride, whilst the dictatorial manner of the Marquis was an insult to his cassock. But the longest evening comes to an end at last, and when the clock struck half-past nine, the Curé rose from his chair

and rubbing his hands together, looked down at the pattern in the carpet.

"I think I must leave you," he said.

"Yes, you have to be up early, Monsieur le Curé," remarked the young Marquise de Savigny, whose life was lived according to a few fixed axioms: society women rose late, and Curés got up with the dawn; and any infraction of the conventionalities of life were unworthy of a woman of the world and of a true Christian.

An awkward moment for the Priest was that in which he had to cross the drawing-room and bow to the Dowager; the few steps which separated him from her *fauteuil* appeared to him to be miles, and the parquet floor was not less arid and scorching to his clumsy feet than would have been the desert of Arabia. The keen scrutiny of the old lady chilled him to the bone, and the touch of her wrinkled fingers in his rough hands made him suddenly conscious of her superiority over him, and of his complete insignificance amongst these highly-bred people.

"To-morrow I shall send you my subscription for the church stove; it is a shame that the children should perish with cold during their Catechism lessons."

The Priest smiled fretfully, but was unable to formulate any thanks, and turning towards the others who had risen to bid him good-night, he shook hands with them.

"I wish you good luck with your new parishioners," said Gaston de Laumel.

"Monsieur le Curé no doubt knows better than we do how to bring back the lost sheep to the fold," sentimentously remarked the young Marquise.

"Anyhow, I trust we may never have to regret the arrival of this couple in our quiet little village," and with these words, spoken half-reprovingly and half-jokingly, the Comte de Laumel escorted the Priest to the hall-door.

## CHAPTER II

Two days later the Savignys and the Laumels were in the young Marquise's drawing-room sipping their tea and demolishing plates of thin bread-and-butter *à l'anglaise*. Unlike the Dowager's old-fashioned sitting-room, this room was filled with small Louis XVI. furniture, comfortable armchairs, and chintz-covered settees; whilst Sèvres knick-knacks, and huge bowls filled with roses of every hue placed about the room made a fitting background for the two women seated there.

The door opened, and Gaston de Laumel came in.

"I say, my dear fellow," and he dropped into a settee, close to Edmond de Savigny, who was cutting the leaves of a new book. "I have seen Madame Darlot; she is a real nymph! such grace and refinement! In the name of all that is wonderful, where can a wretched artist have found this treasure fit to be a queen?"

"Where did you see her?" eagerly asked the Comtesse de Laumel.

"On the road to Amberlé. I was coming back that way, when I saw a couple at a distance. I slackened my motor—and when only a few yards from them—I stared hard."

"What's the man like?" Women did not interest Edmond.

"Something between an impecunious artist and a well-to-do artisan," replied Gaston.

"Good-looking?" inquired abruptly Héléne de Laumel, pouring out a cup of tea for her husband.

"The fellow seemed to be well put together—tall; yes, good-looking—though inclined to stoop under the weight of his painting implements which he carried on his back."

"Does he look respectable?" asked Gertrude de Savigny as she cut a slice of cake.

"Bah! artistic vagabonds need not be respectable—especially when they own such a jewel as this one does." Madame de Savigny had the gift of annoying Gaston beyond words with her priggish manners, but to-day he was in the best of spirits, as was invariably the case when he had been looking at a lovely woman, or been to see a clever play.

"I have often wondered how these rough-hewn village beauties would turn out under the magic touch of a Doucet or a Reboux?" The little Comtesse Hélène drank her tea in confident bliss, for she was known in Paris and on all fashionable race-courses as the best-dressed woman in society.

"My dear Hélène," replied her husband, "I like to think of such beauties as—undressed. Besides, a woman like her is not fashioned by dress, her clothes are only a set off to the beauty of her form."

"You seem to be quite overcome, my dear man," said Edmond.

"Do you know, Edmond, she puts me in mind of what Aunt Valérie must have been in her youth!" suddenly remarked Gaston. At the name of Aunt Valérie, the Marquise de Savigny pursed up her lips, and her eyebrows nearly met over her aquiline nose. The mere mention of such a person brought unpleasant memories back to the Marquis and his wife.

"Is she as beautiful as Lady Vera de Bray?" inquired Hélène de Laumel.

"Perhaps not so commanding—but she has greater mobility of expression, and more grace in her movements. I object to Anglo-Saxon beauties: they seem to throw their health, their muscles at your head. A love affair with them is like a siege," answered Gaston.

"And then Lady Vera's chin is too long—and too square," added Hélène.

"Still, the English woman, when she is beautiful, is a perfect goddess," said Edmond, turning over the pages of his book.

"Yes," replied Gaston listlessly, "but I prefer

nymphs to goddesses ; and I would as soon think of floating in the shallow and treacherous Loire, as of climbing the steep heights of Mont Blanc."

"What's the latest news of Aunt Valérie?" asked Hélène, turning to Edmond de Savigny. She knew the subject to be nauseous to her cousin Gertrude, and she loved to ruffle her sense of propriety.

"I cannot tell you, my dear cousin ; you must ask your husband, who persists in going to her mixed receptions," contemptuously replied Edmond.

"Mixed! my good man, it is not that any longer. Since the Dreyfus affair, her *salon* is a real bazaar in which unscrupulous politicians and financiers lost to shame each try to outdo the other," exclaimed Gaston.

"I cannot understand, my dear Gaston, why you keep accepting her invitations," said Gertrude reprovingly. "It is not to your credit to sit at dinner next to Edgard Combes, or to exchange cigars with Jaurès."

"I think it must be very droll to see these people at close quarters—for she receives also artists and actresses." Hélène spoke in tremulous tones, mentally comparing her aunt's dinner parties to the cages of the wild beasts at feeding-time.

"Now, let's have no nonsense, my dear Hélène," retorted Gaston ; "it is all very well for me to wallow in that mire—I am a man, and it is of no consequence ; but with you, my dear child, it is another matter." His voice suddenly lost its ringing tone, and the look he gave his wife was as severe as it had been sparkling with mirth a minute before.

The Frenchman is the most supple human being, he swiftly passes from cynicism to austerity, with the same ease, indeed, with which an acrobat jumps down from his tight-rope tricks to walk pompously round the circus.

"Whom is she with now?" asked Edmond, lowering his voice whilst the two women replaced their cups on the tea-tray.

"Ha! ha! ha! *with* is hardly the word!" Gaston laughed ironically. "At her age a woman has no more lovers, only business partners. She is now launching into financial schemes—after politics comes business."

"When the devil gets old he turns into——"

"A millionaire," interrupted Hélène, who had been listening to the *aparté*.

"The latest report is that she has made a colossal *coup* at the Stock Exchange—presumably old Hoffmann gave her a hint," said Gaston.

"*Mon Dieu!* is that scoundrel Hoffmann her latest acquisition?" and Edmond threw his book on to a Louis XV. chiffonier. "Well, I should say that woman has run up and down the whole gamut of moral depravity."

"And doubtless some of her shame must stick to our name," summed up Gertrude.

"But I should like to know why on earth she piles up money?" asked Gaston.

"She is all alone in the world, it seems senseless to accumulate such a huge fortune," agreed Edmond.

"Besides, I hear she is out of health and has been laid up for weeks," said Gaston.

"Do not forget, my dear Edmond, that *we* all have children, and that they are her grand-nephews and grand-nieces." Gertrude never forgot the relationship to the reprobate aunt whenever the prospect of an inheritance loomed in the distance.

"That's true," slowly murmured Gaston. A silence fell upon the company like a thick cloud to envelope their cogitations concerning Aunt Valérie's early demise, and their chances of coming in for that colossal fortune so disgracefully acquired.

"Well, shall we have a game of Tennis? Are you coming, Edmond?" brusquely asked Hélène as she jumped up from her seat and arranged her hair in front of the glass. She could not remain quiet for more than half-an-hour, nor could she give more than that time to any amusement. Her days were a

perfect tissue of various pastimes, and the two tenets which she had erected into a Gospel were, to be the smartest woman in Paris, and never to allow herself to be bored.

That night the dinner was more brilliant than usual, and although conversation was kept strictly to serious topics, still the two couples managed to divert themselves. Suggestive *double entente* followed by significant silences relieved the solemnity of the meal over which the Dowager presided. Hélène de Laumel appeared in a wonderful garment from Doucet—something between a tea-gown and an evening dress. The whole party seemed to be in the best possible spirits, as they were looking forward to the approaching date when the old feudal walls of Crespy-sur-Roc would ring with the laughter of the smartest men and women of Paris society. Even upon the thin lips of Gertrude de Savigny a complacent smile was to be seen; for, notwithstanding her priggishness and her provincial *gaucherie*, she privately revelled in frivolous society, and even went so far as to close her eyes to all the sins of her world, so long as she kept them wide open to the peccadilloes of those who were not of her set. The Dowager, in contrast to the gay scene was in a cantankerous frame of mind; she harped upon past political events, and kept comparing them with present political blunders.

Her grandchildren were used to her long speeches; though frequently wincing beneath her cutting remarks. Her plain speech and habit of calling things by their names came to her direct from her eighteenth-century ancestors; and her flashes of scurrilous wit she inherited from a grandmother who had shone at the Court of Louis XV.

"To what depth of infamy will our poor country sink?" incautiously asked Gaston de Laumel.

"Whose fault is it, my dear child, if France is degenerate? You object to playing a part in a country governed as it is, and grumble at the taxes,



and the military service, whilst you complain that the *bourgeoisie* and the lower classes have usurped your place as leaders. But it is your own fault if you are nobodies, and count for nothing in your political Party. You love your Paris, your Clubs, your sports; and more than all, you love to pose as martyrs in politics. You love the dissipations which the capital affords you, and launch into every kind of questionable frolic which it can procure. But what I reproach you for, is not so much this as your false pose of democracy, and your sham modernism. You cannot dance a minuet any longer, and have not the flexibility necessary for the cake-walk; you have lost the art of bowing to a woman, and you have not the courage to throw an impudent lackey out of the window. A spirit of good-comradeship between the sexes has replaced gallantry, and I am not so sure that morality has improved by it. If France is lost to you, it has come to belong to them who have made it what it is. While you laugh and disparage, others approve; and whilst you enjoy yourselves, others take the reins up and drive the coach where they list. Your energy is degraded to the service of your selfishness; you are nothing—in fact, you are mere corpses following your own obsequies."

"My dear Grandmother, we surely could not fight with such base adversaries; the struggle would not be a fair one," remonstrated Edmond.

"Bah! Let us give our miserable leaders a long rope. The country will awake some day, and throw down the Government who have been leading it." Gaston had been too much elated by his beautiful vision of the afternoon, to allow political grievances to disturb his equanimity. Nothing serious could distract his attention, and all the Dowager's sarcastic volleys were turned off by him with a smile.

The young people left the old Marquise in what they called the family vault, and adjourned to the Comtesse de Laumel's boudoir, where they played bridge and smoked, with the exception of Gertrude,

who organized in her mind the household arrangements and the various entertainments for the guests who were expected to arrive shortly. They each withdrew at midnight to their own private apartments, whilst Gaston was left alone with a cigarette between his lips, whistling a music-hall tune, and dreaming of the Nymph who was to bring some excitement into his otherwise stale life at Crespy-sur-Roc.

The Dowager, left alone as she invariably was for a couple of hours before she went to bed, allowed her thoughts to wander amongst the memories of the past. She rarely read in the evening, although during the day she busily perused the philosophical works of all countries. Nietzsche, Kropotkin, Darwin, Herbert Spencer were her daily bread, and her inquisitive mind was stored with the subversive doctrines that had helped to shake society's foundations; but, notwithstanding the breadth of her intellectual outlook and her critical powers, she retained all the social prejudices which were inherent in a highly-bred woman of the world.

It was this conflict in her, between intellectual emancipation and social prejudice, which made her an interesting character. There were few—hardly any—left in the Paris upper ten who combined, as she did, a certain unconventionality in her thought with the strictest morality in conduct. Religion, to her mind, was a social training, imposing certain obligations in which belief played no part. When once the balance-sheet of our moral debts had been added up, and paid to the Church, one might dally at will in all the philosophical ruts on the road. God in His heaven—and wit everywhere, was her dictum through life. As a true daughter of a great soldier, she had been perfectly disciplined by life's routine, and all that had befallen her, were it joyful or baneful, had been accepted with a spirit of fortitude which the world mistook for a religious sense of duty. She subscribed to various charitable organizations, and endowed the

Church with large sums of money ; but, apart from these social obligations, and her regular attendance at Divine Service, she abstained from introducing religion into her private life ; neither did she allow the socialistic reformers whose works she read to influence her mode of living. She had idolized her father, the Marshal de Crespy, and even now, at ninety-two years of age, she mentally appealed to his sense of honour in every serious crisis of her existence.

She had lost two children, who had left behind them these two sons, Edmond de Savigny and Gaston de Laumel. In losing her eldest son she had lost more than a beloved child, for her ambitious dreams were cut short by the death of a young man full of promise, possessing the literary gifts and political powers which were denied to his son Edmond. Her eldest daughter had died giving birth to Gaston de Laumel. A keen observer might have detected a small line deeply furrowing the forehead of the little Sphinx who sat immovably in her chair, year after year, and they would, perhaps, have noticed the slight tremor of the fingers which held a book ; but outsiders, and even near relations, saw no outward change in the woman who had watched the disappearance from her circle of all her loved ones. The Dowager was put down by her world as a hard woman, without a heart, whose sensibilities were blunted by her intellectual powers. In their estimation she had no heart because she gauged men in general, and her immediate *entourage* in particular, with discrimination. But those who judged her thus were those who left her in her drawing-room and never followed her into that sanctum where she lived over again all the past. Her bedroom had been her parents', and there she recalled her childhood and girlhood with the thousand incidents which a creak of a door or the scent of old wood brought so forcibly back to her recollection. She often took out from an old Empire bureau the letters of those whom she had loved and lost. Reverently she handled these thick bundles tied up with narrow ribbons. The

colour had faded from the ribbons, and yellow patches stained the leaves of note-paper, but these precious documents thrilled her heart with retrospective passion. As she read for the thousandth time these impassioned missives from her father to her mother, written when the Marshal was at the wars, the old Dowager would heave a sigh and murmur, "Ah! my mother, you were well loved!" And she would replace the bundle in one of the pigeon-holes with that carefulness and rigidity of touch so habitual to very old people whose movements have lost all strength and suppleness.

Did the episode of her own married life come back to her mind, as she fingered these old love-letters? No one living remembered the Marquis de Savigny, who had died in tragic circumstances, and whose name was never mentioned. The Dowager had no friends left who could talk of him with her. Her present life in the world resembled that of a living person who stands alone in a graveyard. She had married at eighteen a dashing young officer, Raoul de Savigny, whom she believed to be the romantic hero of her dreams; but she soon discovered that he was the hero of many romances besides her own. She made that sad discovery at the birth of her third child—Valérie, the famous Aunt Valérie, whose doubtful reputation was such a perpetual thorn in the sides of the Savignys and the Laumels. Raoul de Savigny had suddenly disappeared from his Parisian circle, carrying away with him an Italian Princess, who had made Paris ring with her beauty and her intrigues. But as ill-luck would have it, the Princess had a Prince, who very soon followed on their track, and found them installed in a villa on the Lake of Como. The husband of the Italian beauty lost no time in challenging the seducer, and it is said that he took even less time in killing him. One fine morning the poor Marquise de Savigny heard of the death of her husband at the same moment that she learnt of his treachery. The Italian Prince brought back his Princess at once to all the scandalmongers of Paris, as

his diplomatic duties did not allow him a longer *congé* abroad. Thus ended the married life of the Dowager. She never had any lovers, although crowds of admirers and sycophants rushed to her *salon*, in which all the leading men and women met together on the neutral ground of literature.

As she recalled that tragic episode of her youth, did she perhaps see in her mind's eye the lovely child who had come into the world at that sad time? Valérie, as a child, had shown a turbulent and self-willed spirit; as a girl, a reckless craving for pleasure, and an inordinate ambition. She fascinated people by her youth and beauty, whilst at the same time she repelled them by her arrogant and disdainful manners. The Dowager had been at a loss what to do with her, and as soon as she had lengthened Valérie's skirts and turned up her hair she married her off to the heir of a dukedom. Valérie, thirsting for freedom and power, accepted the hand and the coronet, and she ran down the large staircase of Crespy, as a bride, as gleefully as she, later on, flew down in the mire of doubtful company.

In the silence of her bedroom, surrounded by the souvenirs of her dead children, the Dowager experienced many sharp pangs of remorse, and pity at times filled her eyes with tears. When she had given birth to her daughter, had she not, in her wounded pride and outraged love, suffered all that a woman can suffer? There had not been fair play for the child who inherited at that time all the conflicting passions of a tormented soul. And then, after her marriage, had not the girl fought an unequal fight with life? Left a widow at twenty, had she not suffered from unceasing disappointments? Having no children of her own, she was deprived of her ducal crown, and had had to suffer many insults from her husband's family. As another excuse for her daughter's reckless temperament, she called up the features of a Polish ancestress of the Savignys, whose reputation at the Court of Louis XV. had been anything but edifying,

although she had cast a brilliant lustre on the name she bore, through her relations with the King. The Dowager was fond of psychological studies, and she tried to explain Valérie's eccentricities with the help of the theory of atavism. She was indulgent towards any deviations from the moral line ; curves did not offend her sense of propriety, as long as they undulated imperceptibly round *bond fide* passion ; although she herself had invariably kept to the high road in preference to the by-lanes. She was often heard to say, "Virtue is a question of climate"—a statement which shocked her *entourage* beyond words, but which proved to cultured people that she had read and assimilated the works of great thinkers. To be the mistress of a great artist, or of a Republican Tribune, could be overlooked : as long as women were beautiful and men were masters, the eternal love-duel would be fought between the unequally-armed combatants. But where the Dowager admitted of no compromise was on the question of political honour ; and to take up the cudgels for a Dreyfus—a traitor to his country—or to receive at your dinner-table the men who, in cold blood, were undermining the moral foundations of France and hurling stones at every noble institution, was to her mind unpardonable, and she felt that the Marshal de Crespy would never have forgiven his grand-daughter's outrageous conduct. For that reason alone had the Dowager severed the bonds which linked her to her only child. Thus would the old Marquise sit for hours in her sanctum thinking over again old thoughts, living over again past events in her life, and continually bringing her father's standards to bear on present incidents and modern individuals.

When very old people do not give way under the pressure of the outer world, nor allow their brain to dissolve into that nebulous state commonly named *second childhood*, they can only preserve their mental energy by knotting twice over the ties which keep body and soul together : opinions develop into fierce

prejudice, tastes turn into aggressive manias ; in fact they suffer from mental ankylosis ; hence the inflexibility of thought, in keeping with the rigidity of limbs, which makes old people appear unsympathetic and inattentive. They stand alone, isolated in their crystallized knowledge, as the child remains solitary in his dumb nescience—they are both impenetrable, the one as the other, and both misunderstood by those who surround them.

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### CHAPTER III

THE Darlots had been the topic of conversation in Crespy-le-Bourg for the inside of a month, and then had been accepted by the villagers and treated by them as old inhabitants. Although Jean Darlot was an artist the peasants took to him, partly because of his free and easy manner, and partly because he talked of his art as if it were on the level of fruit-growing or wine-making. This attitude of Darlot towards his profession pleased the unromantic population of Touraine, and blinded them, for a time, to what they would otherwise have thought of the artist. Peasants are instinctively prejudiced against those who earn their living otherwise than by the products of agriculture. They are suspicious of artists, and although they do not any longer give the epithet of wizard to those who convert reams of paper into banknotes, they are nevertheless very ready to attribute their successes to fraud. They look askance at the scientist who suggests new scientific methods for the improvement of the soil : "Bah ! is that fellow with a top hat going to teach me what I am to do with the earth I have tilled all my life ?" Brains are nothing to them compared with limbs, and no amount of thinking or scientific analysis can ever compete with physical training. It will take more than a century to make rural populations believe that the liberal

arts are not recruited from the ranks of thieves and impostors.

The villagers smiled when they saw the artist start out every morning with his implements strapped on to his shoulders. "A fine-looking chap like that ought to do better than smudge over squares of canvas," the older men would remark to each other. They laughed good-humouredly at a man supporting a wife and family by what they called "gazing at the river"; but as they had taken a liking to him, they simply said he was a good fellow, "though an idler." What the women liked in Lucienne Darlot was the love she bore her children, and last, though not least, the way in which she took her share of household responsibilities and helped little Mariette, their only maid-of-all-work. The Mayor and his wife had made great friends with the Darlots, and they often lunched and dined at each other's houses. The Mayor's wife opened wide her round eyes at Lucienne's pretty frocks and had them copied by the village seamstress, whom she bullied for not turning out the garments as successfully as she expected. She loved to inspect Madame Darlot's wardrobe; and her short, fat fingers handled the soft materials with envious longings. She would also take Lucienne into her confidence and pour into her sympathetic ears all her grievances against her charwoman, the failure of this year's tomato jam, last year's wine harvest, which, although it had not been quite disastrous, still was not very satisfactory.

The Mayor, more enlightened than his wife, was fond of studio jargon; he had often been to Paris when he was a commercial traveller, and had visited picture galleries, theatres, music halls, and seen something of Bohemian life. It gratified him more than anything to be told that Millet the painter was quite of humble origin, and lived like a peasant; not that the Mayor nurtured a great love for the beauties of nature, but simply because it filled his heart with pride to think that a peasant could become famous.



The Curé joined the Mayor and his wife in their approval of the young couple, and often on a Sunday, one would see the whole party seated at luncheon in the old farmyard. The peasants who passed by on the road could peep at the group round the table, and they could hear the peals of laughter ringing through the air at some old jokes dished up for the fiftieth time by the Curé or the Mayor. Others would, through the trees of the Farm, watch the lissom form of Lucienne as she rose from table to attend to Mariette in the kitchen, or returning with a dish of steaming vegetables in her hands. Shrieks from the children, a mild reproof from the father ; and a long silence followed, when knives and forks did their duty to the accompaniment of the rustling of leaves, and the distant cackling of hens.

"There's Monsieur le Curé busy converting the artist," would say old Louvier, who was himself a confirmed atheist. The Curé had found him a hard nut to crack when he first came to Crespy, four years ago, and very soon he had left him to his own devices, for the young Abbé Martin was not gifted with the bump of proselytism, and was more inclined to take people as they were, than to take them for what he might make of them. To see him seated at the Darlots' table, his napkin tucked under his chin, and his face wearing a complacent smile, one wondered whether it were the same man who sat at the Dowager's elegant table. His shyness had vanished, and easy joviality had replaced self-consciousness. At the château he was made to recollect his humble origin ; whilst at the farm he only remembered that he belonged to that race which had produced Rabelais. This artistic *milieu* was new to him. Darlot's studio anecdotes and picturesque view of nature interested him ; and as long as he was in the presence of Madame Darlot he felt at peace, for her beauty appealed to his mind as much as it touched the fibres of his heart. He readily owned her superiority to the rest of his villagers, although she worked as much as many of

his peasant women, and had a very defective education ; but he never, for one instant, classed her with his illiterate parishioners, but felt compelled to judge her as a unique manifestation of humanity which commanded respect and aroused admiration. Her voice was so refined that she might have committed any *lapsus lingue* without evoking the faintest smile on the lips of a fastidious listener ; and her movements were so graceful that no one watching her remove the pans on the kitchen range would ever have taken her for a plebeian.

After the Darlots had been settled at the Farm for a few weeks, the Curé asked Madame Darlot whether they intended to stay at Crespy for some time.

"As long as we can," she had replied. "My husband has more orders from his picture-dealers than he can paint. The children are well—freedom and fresh air are building up their constitutions, and the village school-master will look to their mental condition. What more could we desire than this calm, healthy life?"

The Priest looked at her with surprise. It was so rare to meet a woman who loved nature. He mildly said, "And then they might join the Catechism class?"

"Ah! Monsieur le Curé, I had better tell you at once my children have not been christened." She was turning the wheel of her sewing-machine; the Priest stared at the strip of nun's veiling she placed under the needle.

"I must also tell you, Monsieur le Curé, that I am a foundling."

"Strange woman," thought he. "Others would feel ashamed to own it ; still she is not bold—only truthful."

"Yes, I have no name except that one my husband gave to me. I never knew who was my mother ; and my father, though I know who he was, never took any steps to own me. My nurse brought me up in the country, and when she lost her husband—a hard-working gardener—the small allowance which was paid monthly for my keep and education was used

for the maintenance of the little household, to keep body and soul together. So I had to go out to work, and I found a situation in a laundry, where I worked until I was eighteen. Then I met my husband, whose linen I used to carry home every week to his father's house. He fell in love with me, and to him I owe not only my happiness, but all that I know—my love for art—for life—for nature. I not only owe to him my mental life, but I am indebted to him for the supremest joy a woman can feel—the giving life to children. You see, Monsieur le Curé, one can play one's part in the world in spite of the absence of a creed." The Priest felt uncomfortable and looked meditatively down at his square toes. The prosaic confessions of his parishioners did not thrill his soul; they left him indifferent; but this revelation of the inner life of this woman whom he felt to be pulsating with emotions, stirred him to the quick, and made him feel bashful.

"I should advise you not to speak of this to any one"—he spoke in a subdued tone—"not for fear lest you should wound the religious feelings of the peasants—oh no, there is nothing of that in them; but they are suspicious—you are strangers—above all artists, and they would be less lenient towards you than towards their own people. Moreover, it would reach the ears of the people at the Château, and that might injure you."

"I fail to see how it could," Lucienne had answered. "My husband's career cannot be affected by any one; we do no wrong, and do not mind what the inmates of the Château may think of us."

"That's true," he had replied; "as far as I am concerned, I leave each one to do as he likes, and do not force people to be married in Church any more than I oblige the sick to call me to their bedside."

"Then you believe one can be good without being religious?"

"Madame, I believe that religion is a matter of personal feeling." All the glow which a minute before

had awaked the man in him seemed to have died away, leaving him chilled and cheerless. He felt as if he must give way under a great weight of mental depression, and when he left her on that day he groaned under the realization that ecclesiastical discipline had condemned him for ever to penal servitude of the mind.

He was not accustomed to rate very highly those who separated themselves from the Church; indeed, he was generally inclined to consider them as fools; but the cause for his horror of anything in the shape of a public scandal, lay not so much in the scrupulousness of his sense of what was fitting and right, as in his timid dread of an open fight, and of the blasting winds of publicity. It was this want of courage which constantly led to his sinking back into his former condition of lethargy, from which he had been momentarily aroused by something from the outside. "Bah! life would not be less bitter with freedom than it is now!" and he remained where he was, accepting his down-trodden, impecunious existence in preference to a hard-working independence. He was clever enough to be at variance with his surroundings, but not sufficiently learned to find a solace in the pursuit of knowledge. His mean origin darkened his life, and what little polish scholastic education had given him was but a thin veneer easily chipped off at the slightest contact with those who considered themselves his superiors. His depression was not so much the result of his solitary life, as the outcome of the conflict between his primitive nature and his aspirations. The two original sins of the peasant—pride and distrust—warped his mental energy, throwing him back upon his own meagre resources. His life was the soul's tragedy. Had he risen to some high position in the Church, and been severed from his primitive bondage, he might have developed into a capable man; but as it was, fate, or more likely his own lack of initiative, had brought him back from whence he had gone; and his childhood, the misery

of the years preceding his entrance in the Seminary, the memory of his father as a bowed-down labourer, were unceasingly recalled to his mind by his having to share his daily life with those whom he had hoped to leave behind him. He rarely exchanged many words with his old mother and sister. All their actions jarred upon him, and he accepted their services as he would those of any hired menials. He looked upon the two women as belonging to a different race from himself altogether; and the constant friction of daily life embittered their grievances, whilst it divided them more irrevocably from one another.

Since the arrival of the Darlots he had felt less mournful, and even, at times, had taken a more normal view of life and of human nature. The mere presence of Lucienne brought back harmony to the "sweet bells jangled out of tune," and reconciled him to many things that were vexatious in his surroundings. He often compared his life with hers. She had what he never had known—freedom. Was not that the great secret of happiness? Was not freedom the one means of developing one's individuality? At that rate, Lucienne was the finest example he had ever met of an unfettered human being, for she was linked to a suffering humanity by the strongest bond, that of voluntary sympathy. They often discussed these problems, and he was astonished at her genuine love for life—she, a foundling—what had she to thank life for? She shuddered at his apathy and indifference to human suffering.

"Ah! Madame, you have not gone through the treadmill of Seminary teaching, which kills all spontaneity in us, and crushes out from our hearts the desire to live and struggle."

"Even the desire to love and to pity?" Lucienne had said.

"Especially to love—and even to pity," replied the Abbé; "we are told to hate and despise life, and our theological training inculcates in our minds the fear

of the other world. What inducement is there for us to live?"

"Yes," Lucienne had agreed, "and the worst of it is that you give back evil for evil, and go on teaching that frightful doctrine of self-abnegation to the generations to come. Do you know what it ends by making of you all?"

"No."

"It makes of you materialists at heart beneath the garb of religion. You preach your doctrine by rote, for it has no meaning any longer."

"That woman speaks the truth," thought the Priest. "The contempt for life, and fear of the other world have made cowards and hypocrites of us."

He had for long been imprisoned in the narrow cell of his monotonous existence, and now she had come, with her clear vision and directness of purpose, to drag him up into the daylight of real life. He compared her with other women he had seen, with the celebrated beauties who came every season to the Castle, or paraded in the avenues of the Bois de Boulogne; but they were only dolls animated by a more or less perfect mechanism. He had too much of the primitive man in him not to prefer to the society puppet the woman whose environment was one of household duties; and his passions were more violently stirred by the sight of a woman being kissed and caressed by the rosy lips and dimpled fingers of her children than by all the fascinations of the courtesan amidst her throngs of admirers. The Abbé Martin had not an exalted opinion of society men and women. His ideas about political and social life were tinged with the red hue of the revolution of 1789, although his pride led him to accept the Dowager's invitations and thus use the Castle as a vantage-ground from which he could, with a sense of superiority, look down upon his own class. Although a priest, he was well acquainted with the shady side of society, and knew a great deal about the men who lived in the neighbouring

Châteaux. His pet aversion, the mention of whose name raised an angry flush over his sullen features, was the Baron de Laya. He lived at the Château de Limeray, a few miles off, with his wife and mother-in-law, who had both accepted without a murmur his liaison with the Marquise de Cardaillan. The world talks of these scandals for a short time, and then drops the subject, taking the situation as a matter of course.

After lunching with the Darlots, the Priest often went to see Father Louvier or old Captain Daniel. The latter's house was the last in the village, on the road to Amberlé; on the left, standing on a high rock, he could see the feudal walls of Crespy-sur-Roc. It stood majestically overlooking the high road and undulating river Loire; and was surrounded on three sides by a thickly-wooded park which sloped down to the little hamlet of Crespy-le-Bourg, whose principal cottages clustered round the thick hedge.

The Abbé Martin was fond of his village, although he was constantly irritated by the peasants' stubbornness and prejudices; but he belonged to them, and when the Castle folks talked disparagingly of his humble parishioners he felt his plebeian pride rise within his soul. He knew every curve of the roads and lanes; every noise was familiar to him; and as he returned towards the village he could, in a bird's-eye view, embrace the whole of the little place: the Church, with its picturesque Presbytery on one side, and the old Monastery converted into a farm on the other; the blacksmith and the post-office were at a stone's throw from each other, and his well-trained ear could distinguish the sharp strike of the hammer on the anvil, the rumble of barrels rolling down into the innkeeper's cellars, and the jog-trot of the old mare as she drew the worm-eaten *diligence* along the road. The Priest thought how very little notice the Savignys and Laumels took of the villagers, and how little the latter knew of their squires—with the exception of such malicious gossip as would have

been better left unspoken. But as to knowing one another, they were no nearer doing that in this democratic epoch than they had been under the old *régime* before 1789.

The inhabitants of the Châteaux would be sure to find out the beauty that lay concealed behind the old walls of the Farm, and Lucienne would fall into their snares. It put him out of humour to think that she would come across that dare-devil Roland de Laya, who would, at a glance, reckon her up and fix her marketable value. "Bah! why should I mind, when his wife and the world shut their eyes to his vices?" He had opened the door of his Presbytery and walked through the narrow passage leading to his room. "I suppose she is old enough to take care of herself—besides, Jean Darlot is big enough to defend his goods against such fops." The Abbé would, as usual, sit down at his desk and resume his reading, interrupted a few hours ago; and in endeavouring to deaden all personal longing, he continued to forget the tragedy of life which was being acted all around him at every minute of his existence.

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## CHAPTER IV

TWICE that week did Gaston de Laumel encounter the artist and his wife upon the high-road; on the second occasion he raised his hat, and was rewarded by having his salutation returned.

One day he went so far as to enter the courtyard of the Farm, in the hope of finding some excuse to speak to Lucienne, but the longed-for opportunity did not arise, and he had not quite the audacity to enter a woman's home without her leave. So he had to content himself with gazing at the famous fountain which stood in the centre of the old courtyard, and which antiquarians attributed to the chisel of Benvenuto Cellini. He meant one of these days to



question Darlot as to the probabilities of the truth of the report.

Madame Darlot had returned the Comte de Laumel's bow; and the latter had been more than ever at a loss what to think of her in relation to her husband and environment. Her complete absence of self-consciousness, her ease and striking refinement upset his preconceived views about class and breeding. In common with all the men of his race, he was logical, and disliked to think of misdirected forces in the universe. Here was a power—for great beauty was as much as genius a lever with which to raise the world—here was a mighty power buried within the four walls of a farm; and such things were illogical. A woman with that appearance ought, in his opinion, to be the reigning star of the first theatre in Paris, a queen, even though her empire extended over the *demi-monde* alone. All that was needed was some one to launch her. In France, reputations were made in that way, and success justified the means adopted. In these days of competition and advertisement there was no other way of securing a lasting notoriety except by publicity. Darlot's art would be the first step on the ladder leading to fame; after that, the artist would sink back into the seclusion of his studio, whilst the Nymph sat in her Parisian Elysium, smiling gratefully on her entourage of journalists and men of the world. It was true that journalists were often lacking in nice scruples, sometimes even in honour, but a woman had to pay the penalty of glory. Beauty, that fatal gift, was, in his mind, rarely severed from moral laxity; and as she was not born amongst the privileged circles of society, she was therefore doomed, sooner or later, to a discreditable mode of life.

He was returning one morning from his daily motor drive when he saw some one riding over the draw-bridge; putting on his eyeglass he tried to recognize the horseman, who, having heard the motor, had turned back towards the avenue.

"Ah! is that you, Roland? When did you arrive from Paris?"

"A week ago—I have come to ask you for some lunch. I know it is your holiday meal, as the Dowager remains in her apartments with her souvenirs!"

"All right, *mon cher*; it just happens to suit me." After a pause, "I have made a wonderful discovery."

They were now in the inner court of the Castle, and the groom was coming forward to lead the horse to the stable, whilst the two men entered the hall, where they sat down until the luncheon was announced.

"What is your discovery? Political—or erotic?" inquired the Baron de Laya, negligently playing with his small whip.

"Neither one nor the other—perhaps it is the salvation of a human being!"

"Oh! then you can't expect me to follow, or to help you. Humanity ends where passion begins; and as to the question of salvation, it all depends on a personal notion of the centre of gravity. Besides, for the present, I am labouring under a journalistic fever."

"All the better, my dear fellow; I want you to take up and launch a feminine wonder."

"Ha! ha! ha! my dear Gaston; and you said it was not an amorous discovery! What do you want? A place as a super in a second-rate theatre? Well, I should never have thought that of you, the eclectic, the man of the world *par excellence*!"

"My good man—have you seen Madame Darlot? You know, the painter who has taken the Farm down there?"

"Never knew any one had taken the Farm. Well, what of her?"

"She is a woman wasted by being in the wrong place."

"Bah! she is not the only one. She'll soon struggle on to her own level."

"No doubt; but she needs a man like you to mould a frame for her."

"I have no time, and no inclination at present to set women into frames. My wife—and my mistress

have spoilt the game of love, and I am finding another form of passion in journalism."

"All right, *mon cher*, neglect your opportunities if you will;—but when you see the Nymph, maybe the longing for fresh kisses will come back to you. What are you doing at present?"

"Ah! my dear Gaston, I am playing the part of Don Juan with political principles. I coquette with the followers of the old order of things, indulging with them in the fiercest ultramontanist; and afterwards I go secretly to the highways and byways of socialism, and make love to the radical leaders."

"You always enjoyed being treacherous, my dear Roland," said Gaston, laughing.

"Yes, I believe it is the only atmosphere in which I can breathe freely. But deceiving women is played out with me. I prefer blowing hot and cold with ideas; they are worth the game—and after all, if one is found out—well, the struggle means life—whilst the other leads to ridicule."

"In fact, you have the soul of a highwayman, the temperament of a smuggler; and since railways and electricity have run mystery to ground, you are reduced to exercising your powers in the world of ideas, and to tampering with great principles, as banditti kidnapped travellers at night on the roads."

"Yes, I revel in intrigue, and have found a new mode of rapture, a new thrill: the sensuality of the brain, compared to which the sexual thrill is nothing."

"My dear Roland, you are as cold as death——"

"And as vicious as life," interrupted Roland, who leaned over the arm of his chair like a long snake peering through a thicket. "What could be expected of the lover of Marie de Cardaillan? She made me what I am."

"More likely she found you what you are."

"Anyhow . . . I have made use of her lessons to deceive her in the subtlest way. A woman, when she cannot strike a rival, turns her venomous sting against her own breast and lacerates her bleeding heart. What can an outraged woman do against a news-

paper? For that is after all the rival of Marie de Cardaillan and of Yvonne de Laya."

"You are a strange man, Roland. Why do you tell me all this? You must either trust me entirely or else you must consider me lost to all honour, as you are——"

"No, I do not trust you, for I trust no one, not even myself; and I do not consider you lost as you say, for I do not think I am. But I am sincere, always sincere, now that I have ceased to be a prey to passion. I recognize that I owe a great deal to Marie de Cardaillan; she touched a note of voluptuousness in me, and struck a heap of discordant chords in my being—but she is ignorant of the note she struck within my soul."

Roland was staring at Gaston; he laid his elbow on the arm of his chair, and in his long sinuous hand he held his pale face.

"You remind me of what the Renaissance men were—you have missed your epoch—the twentieth century does not fit you," said Gaston.

"I shall *make* it fit me!" answered Roland, with a firmness of tone which brooked no reply. "I am adaptable; the motor-car will be my post-chaise; the pen my rapier; licence my God. I am a Renaissance man, you say; *très bien*, all the characteristics of that man can be used to modernism of the fiercest type. You, my dear Gaston, still belong to the sectarian type, and cannot grasp the subtlety of my nature. In our world it is either one thing or another: *classé* or *déclassé*, well-bred or ruffian, fanatic or heathen—in fact, in or out of the world. My God! How wearied I am of labels! I want to mix them all up; I want to be fanatic on one side, heathen on the other; and I thirst for complexity, for it is the key to true freedom. To be loyal to the principles of one set seems to me as servile as being faithful to one woman. I cannot bear to see one side of a picture; I must stand on high peaks and grasp all around me; and I am only safe when at high altitudes, where others feel giddy and ready to lose their footing."

"You are a bit of a *revolté*," said Gaston, looking at him reprovingly through his eyeglass.

"Bah! so are you, and all of us, only you do not own to it; you have your little hell where you go when tired of the monotony of your social sky. Your aunt's drawing-room is your mental relaxation—your little hell. As for me, Madame de Vallorbes is old-fashioned; she appears to my mind's eye in the crinoline of the Second Empire. She could not possibly fit my twentieth-century's apotheosis."

"Which is?"

"*Unmorality*—even you shudder at the suggestion. You are also old-fashioned, *mon cher*, although you are only one or two years my senior. You do not know the first meaning of modernism. All you narrow-minded people believe it consists in scientific discoveries and in progress, so that life may be made easier and more agreeable; you do not seem to see that the whole mentality of an epoch must infallibly adapt itself to its material environment. You are very fond of quoting the Renaissance period, very probably because it was a turning point in history, and because it brought new lights on old subjects. Our epoch is the same—no—greater, for higher principles are at stake. We are now bidding an eternal adieu to all that which the world has hitherto thought worth dying for. Our old morality is making way for a new comprehension of virtue; and this time it will not be replaced by other codes of honour, but by—*unmorality*. I know the word has an unpleasing appearance—like the word anarchism, and that other much-abused state of a healthy mind—free-thinking. Very well, then, the epoch in which all material limitations will disappear, and in which we shall be able to grasp the meaning of all that has hitherto seemed mysterious, will need another kind of mind to judge of it. It is evident that the state of mind of a man who took weeks to go to Russia is not the same as that of a man who can use wireless telegraphy as a means of communication."

"But, my dear fellow, life does not solely consist of material progress," objected Gaston.

"The abstract world evolves side by side with

material progress," replied Laya; "loyalty, honour, principles even were all very well at the time when life was isolated and the means of transport limited. But they cannot fit our modern mode of life. This is the great evolution of the twentieth century."

"What a terrible picture you draw of our modern world! But I do not hold with your idea of the twentieth century. I believe we are at the cross-roads of our modern history, and that we shall suddenly be led back into the right path."

"By whom?" inquired Roland.

"I don't know. Some one who will, for the time being, do his work and disappear when the work is done."

"Nonsense, my dear man, the days of Saviours are over. Besides, countries do not want to be saved. You are still of the old world, you stick to the old formulæ, and when once you have drawn a logical sequence to what you believe to be a right cause, you are satisfied, and absolve yourself from using your judgment and your powers of observation."

"Anyhow I do not like your interpretation of your century."

"Then find another more fitting—but I see the Marquise coming down the staircase."

"I suppose it is luncheon time," and the two men rose to greet Gertrude de Savigny, who gave her hand to be kissed by Roland. She knew him to be a dangerous man, and for that reason she valued his attentions more than those of other men, and his worship of the eternal feminine touched her narrow and devout nature to the core.

As they were all gathered in the Dowager's drawing-room in the evening, Gaston asked his Grandmother whether she objected to Darlot's making a sketch of the view from the terrace.

"If you have set your heart upon it, by all means."

"This is all very well," broke in Edmond de Savigny, "but I do not think you will like to pay a lump sum for a daub which you will be obliged to hide in the garret."

"Well, dear Edmond," replied Gaston, "the best thing will be for you to judge of the man's work."

"My dear cousin," said Gertrude, "Edmond can easily do that, for Monsieur Darlot is to be seen every day at about six o'clock on the border of the river. We saw him yesterday, Hélène and I, as we drove by the Loire."

"I do not object to looking at his work when I stroll that way, but I shall first of all ask Monsieur le Curé to find out whether Darlot is likely to accept our offer; I should not like to be refused by an unknown dauber."

"No fear of that," harshly replied Gertrude. "The man will probably jump at your suggestion, and no doubt will need to be shown his place."

The Marquis de Savigny, having been assured by the Curé that Jean Darlot would consent to paint the view, was one day walking along the Amberlé road, when he perceived in the distance a man working at an easel. There had been a violent storm in the neighbourhood, and although the horizon was of a clear opal colour, still large clouds were chasing each other across the sky, and the high poplar trees swayed from right to left. As soon as Edmond had glanced at the canvas on the easel, he recognized a master's hand; for, when his prejudices were not at stake, he could judge impartially, and vibrate to true art; and in some cases had been known to discover the touch of genius where the world had not even detected talent. He was at once favourably disposed towards the artist. His manner was gentle, of that gentleness which is generally the outcome of shyness. Edmond was struck by his earnestness and convictions, and was pleased not to find in his attitude the conceited arrogance he had expected to see. He answered Edmond's questions in a simple and straightforward manner, and the latter listened with delight to his intelligent remarks and to the deep and soft tones of his voice. True, the artist's appearance was shabby, his jacket worn and stained with patches of paint; but he did not look an outcast, and as the Marquis

spoke to him of his art, of the different schools—Rome, Florence, Munich—and enumerated all the galleries of Europe, the young man felt at his ease and gave the best of himself to his interlocutor. Darlot had not seen any of the European galleries, and he believed in no school except that of nature; the two men therefore did not agree in their views of art, and the Marquis smiled at the young artist's ignorance of and contempt for the past; but all the same, he had sufficient intuition to perceive that Jean was an artist, and one, moreover, who would be likely to make his mark in the world. If it was necessary to have the view painted, one might just as well choose this painter as any other. But one had to be careful with artists.

"Their moods are strange, my dear Gaston," he said to his cousin later on, "and it does not follow that because this one feels the dramatic power of clouds, he is necessarily a suitable person to invite here. If he were not so hopelessly uncultured, I should say he had read Ruskin." Gaston cared little for the pathos of clouds, and still less for Ruskin's æsthetic views; all he wanted was to attract the Nymph to the woods of Crespy, amongst the civilized gods and goddesses of Parisian society. What seemed impossible in town appeared quite feasible in the country. The idea of receiving in the historical house of the capital the modest wife of a renownless artist made him smile; but here, in the open air, the incongruity disappeared.

Two days later Jean Darlot was installed in the inner court of the feudal Castle of Crespy-sur-Roc. No one took any notice of him; he came and went without speaking to any one in the place; the servants looked upon him as a sort of menial who came to do his work, like the plumber or the joiner. The Dowager never set eyes upon him, and the younger members of the family merely nodded to him as they went in and out of the Castle, hardly even glancing at his canvas.

One morning, at lunch, Gaston hinted that Madame



Darlot might be asked to tea when her husband had done his work. Strange to say, the Comtesse Hélène did not turn up her impertinent little nose at this and snub her husband. In her small brain there lurked the mischievous idea that perhaps the best way to humiliate Gaston would be to bring the village beauty amongst the refined women of his world, and to enjoy his discomfiture at being obliged to distinguish between his own world and her. The little Comtesse went even so far as to ask Darlot to convey the invitation to his wife. Why not on Thursday next? It was their "at home" day, and she would enjoy the fun of witnessing the complete fiasco of the Nymph.

"You seem very much preoccupied, Jean," remarked Lucienne in the evening, as they stood leaning against the old Renaissance fountain in the Farm.

"Do I, dearest? Perhaps it is because I have never been accustomed to work for people like the Savignys. They depress me somehow—and they take me into an artificial atmosphere."

"Do you not get on with them? I thought you seemed pleased with the two men."

"Oh! Monsieur de Savigny has some notions about art, although they are tinged with Philistinism; but Monsieur de Laumel is irritatingly patronizing."

"And the women?"

"The one is a prig; the other, something between a street urchin and a Parisian seamstress. She is never still, and chatters on drawing-room topics in a kind of music-hall slang. By the bye, she asks you to come on Thursday to take tea up there—it is their 'at home' day."

"I!—you do not seem to like the idea." Lucienne looked at her husband laughingly.

"I do not think you will enjoy it."

"Why not? I have never been anywhere—I know nothing of the world; but if they ask me to go, it must be out of compliment to you. Why should I not go? I think I should enjoy going out."

"Of course, my precious—you must go. Are you

not beautiful enough to shine wherever you are?" He held her face within his two hands and looked tenderly into her eyes, whilst the moon peering through the branches of the trees illumined their two figures. "I cannot expect to keep you all to myself; although I should like no one to set eyes on your beauty. You are my life—my whole being, and whoever gazes at you, or touches your hand, is to me a profaner."

"Jean!—you are not jealous! You never were so in the studio, when your fellow-students talked freely to me; their jokes were not always in the best taste, but you never minded; why should you now?"

"I knew these men of whom you speak; I knew them to be unscrupulous, it is true; but I knew you; and I felt you could not be attracted by their homage. But the subtle charm of this highly-bred world, although their unscrupulousness is no less than ours, is more dangerous; and then, are you not one of them? Have you not in your veins some of that blue blood——?"

"Oh, Jean! I know nothing but what I can remember—and I can only remember my plebeian upbringing—and your love."

"I have given you little, my own darling, compared to what you gave to me," said Jean.

"Oh! you are a poet, an artist, Jean, you see me with your sensitive imagination. You suffer from your surroundings when they fall short of what you expected; but I am more practical, more ignorant also, and therefore I suffer less from the outward world."

"I fear it for you, my lovely one. I fear for your unsophisticated nature; and my imagination is morbidly at work when I think of your beauty being exposed to the admiration of other men. Fancy another man gazing at your exquisitely-shaped neck! Forgive me, but I lose all control of myself—the blood rushes to my head." He held her close to him, and spoke in hoarse whispers.

"My heart, my body are all yours." She thrilled under his touch. "I have been yours ever since I

saw you first—eight years ago—that morning you asked me to come into your studio.”

“Yes, my mother was out—I opened the door to let you in, and I felt compelled to take you to my studio without ever thinking of what I was doing.”

“I had never been in a studio; never seen any pictures. I looked all round, and seemed to recognize all the landscapes I saw. You told me to look at the sketch on the easel; I was close to you, your breath was on my neck; I felt that I somehow belonged to you then and there.”

“I knew it—I knew you loved me then; your whole being trembled, and your nostrils quivered like those of a young foal who inhales fresh air in the prairie. Had I touched your hand, or stooped to caress your neck with my burning lips, you would have swooned into my arms. Neither of us spoke or moved. How long we remained thus, I cannot tell.”

“I was the first to break that oppressive silence, Jean, and left the room without a word.”

“And I let you go without making a movement. I had seen you—and nothing could ever separate us any more.”

“From that hour I forgot everything that had been in the past. I was only eighteen—I had no past, and cared nothing for the future, for I knew it would be full of you. I lived intensely in a glorified present. Your voice was for ever singing in my ears; your look had transformed the whole world into a fairy-land which knew of no time and no distance. After that day I performed my daily occupations as in a visionary state. I went through the day in a kind of dream until the moment I went to sleep again. The meanest household duties were sacred in my life, which from that day was one long apotheosis of you.”

“How superb you were in your abandon! how strong in your weakness! how pure in your passion! My beautiful Lucienne, I have for hours fed on your beauty, gazed at your round breast, and watched the varied glow of your flesh. The delicate blue veins on your neck, arms and temples carried me away on

the high wings of my imagination. Your small, beautifully-shaped ear unblushingly received the passionate confessions of my enamoured heart. Your eyes with rapturous fondness drank in the longing of my whole being. When my trembling mouth lightly touched your full lips, a kind of faintness compelled us to cling more closely to one another; and as we pressed kisses on each other's lips, oblivion slowly enfolded us in an ecstasy of happiness. Ah! my beautiful, who ever dare to say that physical love is solely material, when every one of its manifestations are mysterious and its results amazing! From the first kiss—even less—from the first glance, to the first wail of the child, is not the whole course of physical love one long series of miracles, as prodigious as it is varied?"

"I came to you an uncultured, ignorant girl, unconscious of my own nature. I owe to you my physical development, and my mental acquirements, if I have any."

"Yes, my lovely unknown one; I ignored your name, your life, your origin. I loved to welcome you, as you entered my studio—unknown. You came into my life as nature had entered my artistic life. I had worshipped nature from a boy, and used to crouch on the earth studying the shape of a plant, the shades of the humblest flower." They paused, listening to the grasshoppers singing in the silent night. "How often have I leaned against a tree, far into the afternoon, inhaling the atmosphere redolent with balmy scents, and studying the graceful entwining of the young ivy round the stalwart tree. I have listened to the entrancing song of the nightingale, to the quavers of the thrush, and to the twitter of the lark in the clouds, until I seemed to reel with the intoxication poured into my senses by nature. I was in love with nature until you appeared; and I loved you, because you were a beautiful manifestation of nature in its feminine form. You have intoxicated my whole being, and my art became more precious to me as your love made me happier!" Her

face was close to his ; and he felt her warm breath on his lips. The sky above them quivered with scintillating stars, and the leaves shivered gently in the balmy atmosphere of a warm evening. "As I knelt before a humble periwinkle, I kneel before your beauty ; my heart stopped beating at the song of a bird ; my heart stands still when your voice murmurs loving words in my ear. I love passionately, exclusively, jealously your beauty for all the rapturous joys it gives me. Your love has made me strong, and has developed my manhood."

"Jean, you have given me back lavishly all I gave to you. Your love is mine strengthened, and my love is yours softened. Life, life, is the aim of love ! To you it is art ; to me it is a child ; but the giving birth to something that will again give life to something else is the aim of love."

"How often have we described our first meeting to one another ! Still it is as fresh as the first time. We sing that love canticle for ever and ever, and your lovely form trembles in my arms as it did when I first clasped you in them."

"And it will for ever thrill whenever your arms enfold me and your eyes caress me."

"Ah ! but I fear that other eyes may caress your beauty—other lips may touch your warm lips. My God ! Could other arms ever clasp you as I do now !"

"My beloved ! think of our present hour of rapture. What is to-morrow but to-day repeated ? The intensity of our love makes the present luminous, and throws the past and the future into dense darkness." But the fire had been kindled in his troubled breast, and the woman he clasped in his arms was not only the one he cherished and desired, but she was the one whom he had to shield from other men's desires. His face flushed, and a sombre expression of passion remained upon his features, whilst his dark eyes flashed with the recollections of past joys which made him feel capable of fighting, or killing, for the love of the woman who had entered his studio one lovely spring morning long ago.

## CHAPTER V

THE following Thursday saw Darlot established on the terrace of the Château with his painting paraphernalia. He felt uncomfortable at the idea that all the inmates of the neighbouring Châteaux would come and stand behind him and criticize his work ; and although he tried to concentrate his attention upon the landscape in front of him, the idea that he was a prisoner for the afternoon on this spot, haunted him and spoilt his enjoyment of the scene. He heard the servants preparing tea ; the sound of distant voices came discordantly to his ears, as the Marquise de Savigny and Comtesse de Laumel came out through the hall door to see if all the preparations were complete, and that tea was properly arranged in the inner court in front of the celebrated view. Very soon the rumbling of wheels was to be heard in the distance, followed by the noisy rolling of carriages across the drawbridge. Older guests were taken into the house to pay their respects to the Dowager, who waited to receive them in her cool "family vault," whilst the young visitors, or those at any rate who posed as young, jumped out of their carriages and hastened to greet their hostesses.

In the midst of their chattering and laughter, every one's attention was attracted by a thundering noise, and presently there emerged from the archway a smart four-in-hand with great display of bright harness and trappings, more fitted for a circus than for a country drive. It was the Comte de Marsy, who owned the finest horses of the county, and the noisiest wife in Paris. They had driven fifteen miles from their Château to sip a cup of tea and nibble at a *foie gras* sandwich. Madame de Marsy, Emma Adair that was, was a millionaire of Chicago ; her mother settled down five years ago in Paris with the intention of procuring the best article in the shape of a husband available for her money ; but Dukes having shied at

Emma's loud voice, and Marquesses having shuddered at the coarseness of the mother, the next best article had been purchased in the shape of a good provincial name, although a minor title. There she sat behind her husband, with Roland de Laya near her. When the four-in-hand drew up in the middle of the inner court, the women all rose from their seats and began to talk, and the noise and animation was such that one would easily have mistaken the equipage for a mountebank's caravan. Sunshades were brusquely closed, and one elegantly-gowned figure after another descended from the coach and joined the party on the terrace. The noisy Comtesse de Marsy, with glancing eyes and flashing teeth, seemed to be everywhere at once. Everything about Emma de Marsy was in bad taste, except her toilette. That was as simple as it was costly, and in this only had she learned the Frenchwoman's supreme art of never looking overdressed, although the dress she wears may have cost a small fortune. Although she had not succeeded in capturing a Duke's coronet, her wealth had procured the *entrée* to the exclusive houses of the best society, whilst the most fastidious hostesses had listened with a smile to the vulgarities that fell as glibly from her lips as the dollars from her father's pockets. She was deferential, even obsequious, towards the older ladies in society, but this was entirely a question of the best worldly tactics; for she treated the powers of society as a business man treats the big-wigs of the city, seeking to obtain their patronage, in order to be able afterwards to pat them familiarly on the back. The Comte de Marsy was a cross between a counter-jumper and a city bounder. He was considered to be a sporting man because he kept hunters, played tennis, and had a yacht; but in truth, he preferred bridge to his stables, and the company of women to being on his yacht. He was a great chum of Roland de Laya, whom they had brought with them, accompanied by his mistress, the Marquise de Cardaillan. The latter had been exquisitely pretty some twenty years ago, and she was still fascinatingly wicked. Between the age

of twenty-five and thirty-five she had ruined many men, morally and financially ; but, after forty, she had begun to interest herself in young men of twenty-five, and was now turning round her little finger this dangerous serpent de Laya, who, no doubt, would one of these days turn upon her and bite the finger which held him. Madame de Cardaillan's dress was a mass of white chiffon, lace and ribbons, and her white straw hat framed her kittenish face. She kissed her hostesses, patted the men on the shoulder, and peered into their faces with her wide-opened blue eyes.

The next guest to arrive was the young Duchesse de Vallorbes, on horseback, followed by the Vicomte de Garjiac. The Duchesse was the niece of Aunt Valérie, and although she did not enjoy a much better reputation than her aunt, still she had the advantage over her of being a Duchesse and a perfect fool. Women forbore to censure the coarseness of her amusements because she was plain ; and men laughed at her depravity on account of her mental inferiority. The remaining guests were provincial people from Amberlé, and even from the neighbouring town of Tours, who considered themselves well repaid for their long drive to Crespy by the glimpse they obtained of the gay life of the capital, of that Parisian society of which they always spoke amongst themselves in terms of severe condemnation, yet which they never neglected an opportunity of observing at first hand—feeling no doubt that to those who moved in such exalted spheres much would be forgiven because of their smartness.

Darlot, from his place on the shady side of the court, watched the small groups of women clustered like bunches of primroses in a copse, and he felt inclined to jump over the wall and disappear. He saw men, young and old, gravitating round the *élégantes* ; some talked gravely of frivolous nothings ; others conversed lightly on weighty topics, according to the habit of men of the world. The Marquise de Cardaillan, who was always in quest of novelties, approached the artist and stared at him.



In common with many women over forty, she had a trick of opening her eyes to their fullest extent, knowing quite well that this action lends to the expression a certain *naïveté*, whilst at the same time it smooths away the little wrinkles round the eyes, which are such a fatal sign of Time's ravages. Behind her stood Madame de Marsy, who gazed at Darlot through her eye-glasses, not as a woman on the watch for amorous adventures, but as a shrewd woman of business.

"Why, this is first-rate, Monsieur Darlot!" (Americans have a wonderful gift of catching on to any foreign name.) "You'll have to come to Charlemont and see our side of the river. You might make a sketch of it; but I should like a group of fair women and smart men. You can paint figures—can't you?"

Darlot bowed in silence, and the American turned away convinced that the artist could only paint trees and rivers, as he had not replied in the affirmative. The fact was he had perceived in the distance the pink muslin dress of Lucienne; and he sighed heavily as he turned back to his easel, altogether oblivious to the American, her voice, and her questions.

"Thank you, Madame, for accepting Madame de Laumel's invitation. Allow me to introduce you to her," and Gaston bowed to Madame Darlot, who gave him her hand.

"Who is that? Do you know?" The little Comtesse Hélène had risen and made a movement towards the new-comer.

"I don't know," replied the Duchesse de Vallorbes, brusquely turning her head the other way.

"My dear Hélène, let me present to you Madame Darlot." The smile vanished, the bow was cut short, and a pout of the lips indicated that the little Comtesse was bitterly disappointed at having been caught in flagrant delict of politeness towards the wrong person.

"What do you think of the Nymph?" inquired Madame de Savigny of Roland de Laya, who was leaning on the back of her chair.

"Bah! either a vestal or—a courtesan!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Madame de Cardaillan, seated next to Gertrude de Savigny, "she has two children—so, vestal won't do."

"Well—courtesan remains," replied Laya, taking up Madame de Cardaillan's stick-glass to look at Lucienne.

"*You* ought to know, *mon cher*," added the Marquise de Cardaillan. He turned his face towards her, and looked closely at her features with his strange eyes, which seemed to pierce right to her very soul. He was the only man whose touch made her shiver and whose look made her blush.

For some time nothing was to be heard but the rattling of cups and saucers, teaspoons and silver knives. Hélène passed from one group to another, followed by the Vicomte de Garjiac, handing cups of tea and cakes; whilst Gertrude de Savigny presided at a small table on which were old Spanish wines and lemonade. Every one on the terrace was busy nibbling and giggling. Young Garjiac, looking like a girl, gracefully moving under his masculine garb, brightened up as he approached a feminine form; and Hélène de Laumel, with the movements of a sprightly boy in her rustling petticoats, seemed more at ease among the men, who treated her as a *bon camarade*.

"I believe Monsieur Darlot would like to see our picture gallery," said Edmond de Savigny to Gaston who was standing close to Lucienne, showing her the view her husband was painting. Edmond had not approved of having Madame Darlot on their "at home" day—that was going too far, and, although the artist interested him, the wife, he thought, was best left at home.

"Yes, he is sure to appreciate the few good old masters we possess," answered Gaston, and the two men having gone into the Castle, Gaston remained alone with Lucienne. He looked admiringly at the perfect shape of her shoulders and hips. He smiled softly to himself at the expression of blissful satis-

faction on her face, and attributed the rapturous look in her eyes to the happiness of finding herself in this refined *milieu*.

"I hope, Madame, that you will remain some time in our neighbourhood."

"Oh! certainly, Monsieur; my husband is enthusiastic about the country round here. Beneath its placid exterior he discovers all kinds of hidden beauties; and he studies its changes of aspect just as he would watch the conflicting emotions of a human face."

"If your husband is so fond of studying the psychology of nature, how much more interesting it must be for him to observe the emotions and passions reflected on your lovely face, Madame." She turned her head towards him.

"My husband never paints portraits."

"He is right—he could only paint yours—and always yours." His voice was moved, and the tone with which he spoke made her blush, with a certain pleasure, for, after all, every woman will thrill with satisfaction at the marked attentions of a well-bred man.

"Poor Jean! he would not make his fortune in painting my portrait over and over again."

"Raphael and da Vinci found a source of varied sensations in the women they loved," murmured the Comte de Laumel.

"Yes, but Jean knows every emotion of my soul."

The vibrating voice of the young woman revealed so deeply the love that filled her heart, that Gaston felt the passion of such a woman would be worth winning. She had a way of pronouncing some words which carried one away.

"Do you believe that one man can ever know all the moods of a woman? Especially when that woman is such a one as you! Woman is so complex, so subtle, that the man who prides himself on knowing every corner of her heart, and all her passions, really knows only one side of her nature. To him she shows one side, to another she will show a different aspect; and she yet remains as perfectly sincere as she is variable."

"What becomes of faithfulness at that rate?" inquired Lucienne, leaning against the wall, where a lizard was basking in the sun.

"Ah! faithfulness and unfaithfulness are words invented to facilitate divorces. We act according to the different temperaments that our ancestors have handed down to us. One man will appeal to the intellect of a woman, another will touch the deepest emotions of her heart, whilst yet another will arouse her sensuous passions, according to the mood she is in; but the woman who has loved but once, has not yet reached her full development."

"Believe me, Monsieur, all women are not alike." She spoke low, and a veil of melancholy clouded the brilliancy of her eyes.

"Bah! all women say that at their first love, and at their second and third lover they deceive themselves into believing that their last passion is their first and only one."

"Evidently, I am not a woman——"

"Like others—no," interrupted the Comte, bowing. "No, you are right, you are more bewitching, more subtle, and it is impossible that one man could satisfy your many-sided nature."

"Then, I am not the woman you imagine," and she threw her head back and laughed good-humouredly. She had heard these identical theories expounded by artists in her husband's studio; and as a girl she had listened to many coarse conversations amongst the laundry girls whose conception of the relation between men and women seemed to be on a level with those of the Comte de Laumel. The choice of words, of manner differed, but the passions were the same.

Gaston did not often meet women who pooh-poohed his attentions, and her mocking attitude puzzled him, the more so as he knew her not to be a *blasé* woman of the world. Apparently she possessed a certain amount of wit, and that did not spoil her, nor was he blind to her outward elegance, although he could not tell where her clothes came from; there was no hallmark about her style of dress which would indicate

her costumier or milliner. Was she perhaps an extremely cunning woman? In that case the game was worth the trouble.

"*Mon cher*, Monsieur Darlot has lost his heart to the Delacroix that my father purchased." Edmond de Savigny had returned with Jean.

"But Monsieur Darlot is welcome to make a copy of it. I am sure you will not object, Edmond?" replied Gaston, delighted to find some pretext for the artist to come again.

"Why, my dear, who is that talking with your husband?" and Madame de Marsy's voice sounded like a trumpet all over the terrace.

"Ah! that's the artist's wife. I don't know why Gaston insisted on her coming;" and Hélène raised her shoulders and looked scornful.

"Why! because she is beautiful, no doubt. What a splendid model she would make!" turning to the Duchesse. "You know I paint a lot—portraits mostly. Whistler said I had genius—the dear creature—but he advised me not to lose my originality on technique. Ha! ha! ha!"

"Dear Comtesse, pray take me as one of your models;" and Monsieur de Laya leaned over the American's shoulder.

"As what? A satyr? You would not look bad as one. Come along, Garjiac, give me that cup of tea. I am going to introduce myself to your rustic beauty;" and the Comtesse was off in a peal of laughter.

"You take tea?" she inquired, as soon as she was close to Lucienne. The latter took the cup with a smile, as much at her ease as if she had known Madame de Marsy all her life.

"Now, I do hope you will come and see *our* side of the river. I want your husband to paint *our* view; but I think, from what I gathered, that he does not paint the human form. Leave that part to me; I am used to painting portraits, and you would do finely among my group of fair women." The artist began to feel uncomfortable, and the little furrows on his

forehead deepened. Surely Lucienne was not going to accept such a grotesque invitation.

Madame de Marsy's advances to Lucienne were the signal for Hélène de Laumel's sudden attentions towards the woman she had snubbed an hour before. She did not want the hosts of Charlemont to monopolize the Nymph, and as she could not prevent Madame de Marsy from taking her up, she at once made up her mind to change her tactics, and went up to Lucienne with the *banale* phrases on her lips with which fashionable women fence with each other.

"Have you an 'at home' day on which I may find you, Madame?" Hélène put the question like a lesson one is accustomed to recite a hundred times a day.

"Ah! Madame, an 'at home' day is for those who can have privacy, and my door is always open; besides, we have only one living-room."

"I caught sight of your two lovely children the other day," exclaimed Madame de Savigny, who had followed Hélène, scrutinizing every seam and tuck of Lucienne's frock. "Only a *bonne Anglaise* can keep children so fresh and neat. I wonder where you found yours. Do tell me!"

"I have no *bonne Anglaise*, Madame. I dress my children myself, and their father teaches them."

"How wonderful!" remarked the Comtesse Hélène, looking at Lucienne's hat and skirt, and wondering how a poor artist could turn out a wife so perfectly dressed, and where this gown had been purchased. Lucienne was not yet an experienced observer of the ways of society women, and could not unravel the thoughts of these complex little souls. She could not see that she had upset all their theories by having the appearance of an elegant and wealthy woman, whilst she lived a life of extreme simplicity. Her beauty even was brought to bear witness against her; and because her account of herself did not fit in with their preconceived ideas, they felt sure they would soon discover that the Nymph was no better than she should be. At the same time, they felt inwardly

gratified that this woman had the same passions as they had, for, in their limited minds they judged that to wear well-turned-out frocks and to have an appearance totally in contradiction with her state of fortune and her *milieu*, was a sure proof that she nurtured a morbid craving for luxury and dissipation ; and that to obtain what she wished for, she would have recourse to the usual compromise to which women, who meant to keep up certain appearances on no money, were condemned.

The American's egotistical advances had given the turn to public opinion. The Comtesse Hélène, who had followed out of mere spite, set the fashion for the rest of the guests ; whilst the country neighbours pressed eagerly forward to see what was going on, prompted partly by curiosity, and partly perhaps carried along by that psychical power of a magnetism which moves masses to concerted actions. The mob on one occasion proclaims a man their master, as easily as on another they are ready to hurl him down from the Tarpeian rock ; so does that small image of the crowd—society—play fast and loose with those who are lucky—or unlucky enough—to cross the threshold of their sacred precincts. Public opinion of the drawing-room depends on less than a word, a look, or a movement. In one instant insolence is changed to morbid curiosity ; contemptuous silence into familiar garrulity. Society women live in the same circle, and rotate in the same groove from cradle to coffin ; no wonder they have but one set of phrases, an assortment of questions which they indiscriminately put to a Duchess or to a farmer's wife. They attribute to the women of different classes the same occupations, the same means as their own, and are now, in the twentieth century, as ignorant of the struggle for life as the Queen Marie Antoinette was, when she advised the starvelings to eat cake if they had no bread.

"Well, Roland, do you not think Madame Darlot very beautiful?" The two men were standing against the wall of the terrace after the departure of the artist.

"Women do not interest me, as you know. Beautiful? yes, she is that," and Laya leaned his elbows on the parapet and gazed at the poplars that were growing more and more purple under the rays of the setting sun.

"And perhaps more depraved than others—beneath her guileless expression?" added Gaston.

"In that case she will not interest me; depravity is played out."

"She is perhaps the impersonation of your twentieth-century—*unmorality*?"

"Ha! ha! ha! a sort of allegory! I doubt it. Women are incapable of moral courage. When they are brave, and preach a modern gospel, they are generally ugly and sexless, or else hysterical, but, in any case, unbalanced. I have not yet seen the woman who is so well balanced that she can stand upright in the present modern world without backing herself against the past, and staring at the future. The present is a giddy height, and it needs a sure foot to stand on it without turning faint."

"Mountaineering is not always safe, my dear Laya, and many break their necks in attempting the ascent of high peaks."

"To fall into the dark chasms of the past, or to launch into mild speculations about a nebulous future is still more unsafe," replied Laya. "Life must be gauged by daily experience. The past has only an archæological value; and those who live with their eyes fixed on bygone events resemble the dry-as-dust archæologists who reduce their interests to the study of Egyptian civilization."

"Still, the present is the result of the past; it seems logical," interposed Gaston.

"My dear fellow, logic applied to life is as inapplicable as would be the rule of three to a woman's unruly passions. There is no logic in human emotions. To live in the present, intensely, is the sure way of unconsciously building up the future."

"Dear Roland, you only preach the gospel of egoism, and proclaim the god of enjoyment! Where



are duties, principles, the sense of right and wrong, in your chaotic conception of life?"

"It is your old conception of duties and principles that is chaotic, because you persist in giving wrong names to things; and in imagining that your old moral barriers and religious fences can continue to circumscribe the modern world. No, your moral boundaries are old-fashioned, and cannot fit our modernism. Be brave enough to face it and adopt my creed of——"

"*Unmorality*," interrupted Laumel. "There is the four-in-hand; and Madame de Marsy is making furious signs to you to join them. Good-bye," and the two men shook hands and separated.

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## CHAPTER VI

EVERYTHING went like clockwork at Crespy-sur-Roc. The legions of servants, male and female, obeyed the instructions of Victoire, who had ruled in the housekeeper's room for more than thirty years; whilst Denys took charge of the stables, and governed with a rod of iron a squadron of under-coachmen and grooms. The head coachman was a small potentate at the head of his equine kingdom, and would only receive his orders from the Marquis de Savigny, or from the Comtesse Hélène. For the latter he had a great regard, considering her a first-rate horsewoman, whilst the Marquise Edmond de Savigny, he considered, was beneath contempt, as she could not ride, and would persist in reproving him for his reckless driving.

Gertrude de Savigny was a clever housekeeper, and every morning held a private *levée* in her bedroom with Victoire, to discuss the household organization. She lived systematically, and built for herself a round of duties for the first part of the day, which she performed with methodical pomposity. She suspected every one of the domestics of trickery,

and approved of none who did their duty—at least, never openly—and finally knew no more of her immediate surroundings than the Shah of Persia knew of the *état d'âme* of a French peasant. She believed severity to be the best method of governing men; conscientiousness was her great preoccupation throughout life, and her love of detail was a constant factor in her daily tasks. She had ready-made phrases for every occasion: at breakfast she would invariably inquire after the health of her guests, never forgetting who suffered from insomnia, or who was troubled with dyspepsia; but her manner never betrayed the slightest interest as to what the reply might be. She had sentences prepared for the different hours of the day, relating to the weather, the drives in the neighbourhood, or the news of the day, political and social. At meals she always observed whether her guests helped themselves twice to any dish; and when she was preoccupied or annoyed with any one or anything, she had an irritating trick of rubbing her hands as though she were washing them, whilst she smiled nervously meanwhile, showing the gums of her teeth.

The Marquis de Savigny and his wife were both intensely selfish; the only difference between them was, that she was selfish like a woman, and he like a man; therefore they both agreed perfectly in driving the coach of life in the way best suited to themselves. As long as she could indulge to her heart's content in ruling over her household and her children, she most willingly left the rest to him; and, as long as he could direct the political and religious principles of his family, and please himself as to the future education of his children, and in the choice of his son's career, he would smile complacently at his wife's tyrannical spirit, and bow courteously before her will in all minor concerns. The result was that they never clashed nor even disagreed in any great crisis, nor did they ever tread upon each other's toes in the details of everyday life. Their lives were so perfectly well fitted to each other that they never interfered; the fact is, they had applied to selfishness

—that powerful factor in human affairs—the system of division of labour, which brought peace at home, and success in society.

Edmond de Savigny was generally disliked by the villagers, and universally misunderstood by every one; for his self-consciousness made him appear haughtier than he was, and more unsympathetic than he felt. Aunt Valérie had a particular aversion for this nephew of hers, which she extended to his wife, for whom she harboured a perfect loathing. She was once overheard to say (in her drawing-room) that the few drops of Polish blood which ran through his veins had no doubt been so bored that they had turned acid! She much preferred her nephew Gaston de Laumel; for the latter's nature was more supple, and his mind more receptive. But, as she often informed her entourage, "Gaston has not sufficient temperament to be a barefaced rake, nor enough will power to become a notable personality. The few drops of Polish blood which made of poor Edmond a discontented creature, and of me a *déclassée*, have developed Gaston into a happy-go-lucky *fainéant*. He is a drawing-room man, a club man; he loves music, women and good food. He is faint-hearted in active life, vain of his own brain power, and thoroughly sceptical of other people's acquirements. He lets himself slide with the tide of life, seeing everything, believing in nothing; and, although interesting himself in all kinds of things, social and artistic, he never lets himself be absorbed by any one or anything."

To Gaston de Laumel was reserved the supervision of the culinary department at Crespy-sur-Roc. No one knew better than the Comte how to compose the *menu* of a big dinner, of a shooting lunch, or even of a ball supper. He also had long interviews with the head gardener; and the artistic and original decorations of the dinner tables and reception rooms were the creations of Gaston's inventive powers and fastidious taste.

A grand ball was to be given at the Château next

day, Tuesday, and already the little station of Amberlé was packed with trunks of every dimension, which were to be carted off to Crespy in huge vans ; whilst landaus, victorias and motor-cars sped along the road to the Château carrying the numerous guests who had arrived from all parts. Many were only invited for the ball and would return next day to their neighbouring abodes ; but a number of guests had been asked to stay at Crespy for the fortnight's festivities. Among the latter were the Marsys, the Vallorbes, the Marquise de Cardaillan, Roland de Laya, and others who belonged to the *crème de la crème* of French aristocracy.

The Castle was huge, although its perfect symmetry and architectural purity gave it the appearance of being one of the smallest Châteaux of Touraine. Every room in it was habitable, with the exception of the two or three historical rooms, kept as show rooms, and opened to the public once a week in summer. When carriage after carriage drove into the inner court, and landed the guests at the hall door, one might well wonder where all these people would find room in the Château ; but it was not until they were all seated in the banquetting-hall that one quite realized how many were engulfed within its feudal walls.

During that fortnight's carousal the Dowager made a practice of taking her scanty meals in her bedroom, only remaining a few hours in the afternoon and evening in her own softly-lighted drawing-room ; for she had absolutely resisted the innovation of electric light in her own apartments. Here she received a good many who belonged to her Faubourg St. Germain set ; but she was generally disappointed with the present generation : the women struck her as poor copies of the *demi-mondaine*, whilst the men were mere parodies of English sportsmen. She had little to say to them, when they gathered round her to make *banale* remarks ; and they must no doubt have found it a laborious effort to adjust themselves, even for one hour, to her views on life, and to her judgments on human beings. Her indignant outbursts at the apathy of the

aristocracy were offensive to her provincial friends, who hid their political pusillanimity behind a mock dignity; and her Parisian circle declared her old-fashioned in her reproof of modern bad manners. On the other hand, the Dowager came to the conclusion that the provincial nobility was composed of living corpses, who only stood in the way of any reasonable Royalist Restoration; whilst her immediate entourage, to her mind, only thought of backing out of all political responsibilities, and preferred to turn all serious subjects into a general round of pleasures. The tittle-tattle brought down from Paris and the fashionable sea-side resorts, was listened to by the Dowager with that enigmatic smile, which made her friends assert that, although the old Marquise de Savigny might have been an interesting and prominent woman at the time of Madame Recamier and Monsieur de Chateaubriand, she had now lost all interest in what went on around her at the present time.

The dinner that preceded the ball was brilliant and gay. The women were young and witty—or at least spoke out their minds unreservedly; some were renowned beauties; many had had, or still were engaged in, amorous intrigues; and all were well dressed. The men varied in age from twenty-five to forty, but all had the same tastes, and agreed as to the pleasantness of the pursuits which made life worth living.

After the feverish hurry of Paris life, intrigues would acquire a new piquancy in the relative calm and balmy atmosphere of the country. During that fortnight's merry-making, many an *amourette* which had been merely sketched between an appointment at Doucet and a cup of tea at Ritz, would develop into a *grande passion* along the winding corridors of the feudal Château; whilst the Gordian knot of some *liaison* which all Paris had gossiped about last winter, would be definitively cut during the long rides of a paper chase between lunch and tea. The Duchesse de Vallobes, seated at the right hand of Edmond de Savigny, and having her faithful admirer, de Garjiac, on her left, looked striking in a bright red garment, and

strange Lalique jewellery, which Roland de Laya had suggested to the Parisian Benvenuto Cellini ; but her conversation was no doubt more striking, judging from Edmond, who grinned on one side of his mouth and looked sour from the other, and from de Garjiac's bland admiration and laughter at every one of her coarse remarks. The Comtesse de Marsy, resplendent in her diamond necklace which her impecunious spouse had given to her with what papa Adair had generously settled on him, was entertaining her side of the table with anecdotes about the American colony in Rome and Florence. The Marquise de Cardaillan, seated between Laya and the Duc de Vallorbes, did not look more than thirty-five, in her simple muslin frock trimmed with English point lace and baby ribbons. She often dressed according to her moods, and feeling in a juvenile disposition that evening, she had appeared in a girlish *toilette*, without one jewel on her lovely neck and arms,—a simplicity that seemed somewhat out of place in a big hall. Marie de Cardaillan was more kittenish than ever this evening, and scratched right and left with her pitiless claws. She found Roland de Laya absent-minded at dinner, and when she approached him in the hall to give him a cup of coffee, she felt his cruel eyes fixed on her vacantly, as if he were looking at something far, far beyond her. These two had held to one another for many years, by some secret bond which either had found difficult to break ; and their *liaison* was a mental sport for society, who every morning expected to hear of their final rupture.

The rumble of carriages over the drawbridge was continual ; at the hall door, one after the other, guests from the neighbouring Châteaux arrived, even as far as Tours and Blois. Matrons, fat and lean, gave a last glance at their daughters' head dress, and shook out their ball dress before making their *entrée* into the ball-room, where the Marquise de Savigny stood greeting her guests with studied affability and pretentious solemnity ; whilst the little Comtesse Hélène's manners passed from trivial familiarity to supercilious

impertinence. She had studied a certain demeanour which helped her through critical moments in her social life ; and she excelled in the art of greeting or dismissing her guests with a nod, a gesture, or a waving of the hand which indicated the closest *camaraderie*, or the grossest insolence.

The ball-room was filling very fast, and the young couples were soon gliding over the parquet floor to the tune of a voluptuous valse. As Gaston de Laumel stood in one of the doorways he saw couple after couple go by : Madame de Marsy in the arms of a young provincial Marquis who had no money, a lovely Château on the banks of the Loire, and a long list of debts ; then came the Duchesse de Vallorbes, giggling and leaning on the narrow shoulder of the Vicomte de Garjiac. Edmond de Savigny tried to steer safely one of the leaders of fashion of Tours, but he disliked dancing, and soon stopped ; Marie de Cardaillan then glided past, bending gracefully on the arm of a young man of twenty-six, whose head she had already turned, and whose purse she soon intended to empty.

The hum of voices was growing louder every minute, as guests poured into the room, and couples bumped against each other, murmuring excuses to those whose toes they trod upon, or scowling nervously at others who shoved their elbows into their ribs. The valse came to an end, and was soon followed by a square dance to allow elderly women, or very young girls, to exercise their limbs.

Gaston, from his post, watched Lucienne's entrance into the ball-room with her husband, who looked awkward and taciturn. Madame de Savigny shook hands with her, and Edmond took hold of the artist in a patronizing manner, introducing him to a few elderly men who came from Blois, or to some humble county squires ; whilst Madame Darlot seated herself between two middle-aged women, who looked her up and down in that supercilious fashion adopted by such persons when they meet any one whom they do not know.

"Where can that woman have learned her queenly way of entering a room?" said Gaston to Roland de Laya as the latter came up to him.

"Hum! yes—but there is still in the movements of the arms a little of that *brusquerie* which belongs to her class," replied Roland, fixing his eyeglass to look at Lucienne.

"See how beautifully her head is set on her shoulders. She would make many of our smart women split with envy with that graceful way of throwing back her head, and with that radiant smile which makes her hair and skin appear even fairer than they are."

"Look at her seated as she is," went on Roland, "there is a *gaucherie* about her, and a total ignorance in the art of attitudes, which would be adorable were not the woman sure to be a true *bourgeoise*, wedded to conventionalities of the worst kind. Look round at our *élégantes*; I will give them the credit for one thing—they know how to sit down, and how to rise from their seat."

"Ha! ha! ha! that's about all they know," laughed Gaston, "but the other ones—the more amusing ones—have mastered the science of——"

"Lying down!" interrupted Roland, dropping his eyeglass.

"This woman, my dear Laya, is more than a mere *bourgeoise*. She has the form of a Venus, and the grace and freedom of Diana the huntress. She is not *gauche*, but only unaccustomed to the light and crowd of our four-walled kingdom. Her eyelids droop languidly over her brown pupils to protect their tender glances from the strong glare, and she turns her head nervously from right to left, much the same as a frightened child would do in a crowd. Look—her lips are parted, her breathing is quick, for she no doubt feels oppressed in this atmosphere overladen with the scent of flowers and tropical plants."

"Bah! *mon cher*! your Nymph is only a little scared at being transplanted into society; but she will soon be tamed; and then, you will wonder at her pranks."



"All the better, my dear fellow—for she will be more amusing."

"Well, I don't quite agree with you, Gaston; Nymphs that evolve into Phrynes cease to attract me now. When I come across a wood-nymph who will prefer her forests to the trees of the Parc Monceau, the wild songs of birds to the *chansons* of Paulus, and the rustling streams to the artificial lake of the Bois de Boulogne, then I shall pause to look at her; maybe I shall take off my hat to her;—but, *mon cher*, that woman does not exist."

"It is possible that if she existed, she would bore you; she certainly would me."

"Haven't had the opportunity yet of judging whether she would or not. Anyhow, I do not wish to meet her." After a pause Roland went on, "I know pretty well every type of woman; and I am also acquainted with the whole scale of our *femmes du monde*. By the way, I must go and flirt with your cousin, Madame de Savigny."

"Well, my dear fellow, if *that* amuses you, *chacun à son goût* . . . ." and he interrupted his sentence with a short laugh.

"Her rigidity quickens my blood, my dear Gaston. I say"—and he laid his long thin hand on de Laumel's shoulder—"I say, what a terrible wreck a woman like your cousin becomes when she is a prey to passion. These rigid natures never bend, but break in one's arms; they know no limits to their frenzy; their strict virtue even becomes a powerful stimulus to their love, for they bring self-abnegation to bear on their abandon. Their long habit of giving up their will, first to their parents, then to their husbands—and always to their God, trains them to a complete self-immolation whenever passion comes to rouse them. Beware of the love of a strictly honest woman."

"You are a strange man, Laya, absolutely irreverent; but still you exercise a dangerous fascination over us all—even over my stiff cousin—well, you may be right—there is no knowing anything certainly about women!"

The two men went in different directions ; Roland found the Marquise de Savigny in the centre of a group of provincial girls, and leaning over the back of her chair conversed on indifferent subjects with that suggestive manner which always gave him the appearance of making desperate love to a woman. Gaston crossed to the other end of the great room, now that the dance had stopped for a moment, and shook hands with the guests who had just arrived ; he eyed some of the women's frocks with judicious criticisms.

Very soon the orchestra tuned up again and started the strains of a cake-walk, which made the dancers get up and form themselves into a procession. Little Comtesse Hélène behaved like a street urchin in lace petticoats, and danced it as a joke. Her movements were anything but graceful, and occasionally she broke out into an extravaganza more suited to the *Moulin Rouge* than to a private ball-room ; picking up her dress in both hands, and shuffling with her tiny feet, until she ended her antics by running out of the procession, and throwing herself into a chair, roaring with laughter meanwhile.

Gaston saw Lucienne seated not far from him, and he took the chair that stood behind her.

"I am sure you have never danced this cake-walk ?"

"I have seen it at the Casino de Paris."

"No doubt you thought it better danced there than it is here."

"I did not think it good in either place, if you want my candid opinion. These kind of dances do not suit our climes. Each country has its own appropriate dance, which in fact, is its very soul, but which transplanted into another clime, loses its meaning. We miss the atmosphere, the conviction that should accompany it, and we get only the comical gestures. . . ."

She suddenly became aware that she had been ridiculizing the present actors of this performance, and a vivid blush suffused her cheeks. He noticed it, for he had not ceased gazing at the shape of her head, the line of her neck, and the rounded shoulders so gracefully draped with white silk.

"You do not like dancing?"

"I have very rarely danced," she replied. Once or twice she recollected having been to a public ball in the environs of Paris; but the rooms were too small, and men too rough, so she had given up going to such places.

"There never is enough space, nor is the music ever alluring enough to satisfy my love for dancing;—that must be the reason why I never dance."

"Do you carry that excessive fastidiousness into every one of your tastes—or passions?"

"A good deal of my tastes have remained *en théorie*, for my experience of life is very limited."

"That is what charms me in you—you have the beauty of a highly-bred woman of the world, and the—what can I call it?—"

"Call it the ignorance of a plebeian."

"No—you are no plebeian. Near you I feel that I have never lived before, and that other women have vanished. Their beauty is artificial; their charm and grace they owe to a long lineage of good breeding—they are all cut too much after one pattern, which ceases to fascinate. You are stimulating and fearless as an Amazon. Why is it that near you I feel as if nothing mattered, and as if you and I were isolated in this crowded room? . . ." After a pause, during which he leaned on the back of her chair, "Have you ever visited the Château?"

"No, Monsieur."

"Not even the historical apartments? You must see them."

"I shall be delighted," she answered, pleased at the thought of leaving this close room, and of changing the conversation.

"I will take you round." She stood up and, preceded by the Comte, moved, amongst the chairs, towards the door where men were standing, and through which women were passing in and out. The men eyed Lucienne with that critical look with which they are in the habit of examining a woman whom they know does not belong to their set; and the women,

putting up their glasses, glared at her with a smile of derision upon their lips.

"Who's that, Vallorbes? What shoulders, by Jove!"

"Yes, there's something to love!" drawled out the Duc de Vallorbes. "I dare say some new importation from Tours or Blois."

"Ah! *ma chère*, do you know her? I don't. Who is she?" anxiously inquired the Baronne de Valtelle of her neighbour, the Comtesse de Belloy.

"Don't know, my dearest. At a distance she seemed well dressed; but, closer——" The baronne pursed up her mouth.

"Yes, Doucet, made at home." The Comtesse, having taken the words out of her friend's mouth, turned round to stare well at Lucienne. "She does not wear the new corsets—how unfashionable it makes a woman appear at once, to be sure."

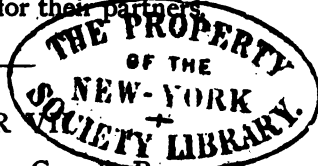
"That's the sort of woman my husband admires," remarked Madame de Valtelle; "he upbraids me for being a pack of bones, and says that there are three things with which a woman can conquer a man: the first is flesh, the second is flesh, and the third is—flesh!"

"Ha! ha! ha!"

The orchestra had started to play a well-known valse, which drowned the women's chatter, and Gaston and Lucienne were soon out of sight in the general hurry of dancers looking out for their partners.

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CHAPTER



GASTON led her through the Guard's Room, where armour of various shapes and sizes stood against the walls; and they entered the long picture gallery dimly lighted by a few electric bulbs. Long rows of ancestors of the Crespys and their kinsmen stood in their old frames, and as the two walked slowly, she looking to her right and to her left, he named those who had played an important part in the history of

their country. As they passed on, the sound of the valse grew fainter, and very soon was heard no more.

"That is an ancestor of my grandfather Savigny, who is celebrated in history for having fought more duels than even Boutteville and Bussy-Rabutin—I think about three hundred!"

"Are you proud of your ancestor?" asked Lucienne, turning towards her guide, and laughing good-humouredly.

"He was a gallant knight, who feared no man, and whom no woman could resist. I envy him for this——" and Gaston bowed before the young woman. "This is Valérie Oblinska, who married the Marquis de Crespy—he was killed at Fontenoy."

"She is very lovely;" and Lucienne came closer to the portrait of the celebrated favourite of Louis XV.

"Yes, and the King had the good taste to remark his poor wife's maid of honour; and she was witty enough to use the kingly favour for the greater honour of the Crespy family, for he married her off to François de Crespy, whom he at once made a *Maréchal de Camp*, and at the same time a happy father. She is quite unlike any of the family, except one member, to whom she has handed down her fatal power of seduction."

"There are no kings now in France to sanction such conduct, and to reward it with royal favours." Lucienne gave a malicious side-glance at her companion.

"You have her eyes, Madame—eyes as deep as they are sparkling, and as tender as they can be haughty; but let us pass on." He showed signs of impatience. "Here is the Maréchal de Crespy—my great-grandfather. He was one of the heroes of the Emigration, and fought with the allied armies against the Republic and the First Empire."

"Is your Grandmother——?"

"Yes, she is his daughter," interrupted Gaston.

"She is not at the ball?"

"Yes, and no; she remains in her own drawing-room, and vanishes like Cinderella on the stroke of

eleven. Mind this step, Madame, you are so tall that you must stoop. They built small rooms and narrow doors in the past." They had entered a square room hung round with old Flemish tapestries representing quaint hunting scenes. Two narrow latticed windows allowed some light to come through during the day-time, and at night the rays of the moon lighted up corners of chests, and figures on the tapestries. Little by little Lucienne distinguished a four-post bed at one side, a coffer at another, and a Renaissance cabinet against the third panel.

"This is the room of Catherine de Medici. Here is the old chest in which she kept her clothes. Here, on that table, a casket—a perfect gem—given by Catherine to an ancestress of the Crespys. The great Florentine politician was supposed to have kept some of her poisons in this casket. It was a Crespy who took part in the conspiracy against the Guise, and who helped to free the country from that rising power——" A look from Lucienne revealed to Gaston that she was ignorant of the facts of the conspiracy and the murder of the Duc de Guise. "You do not know of that page in our history?"

"I am afraid I am very ignorant of many pages in history. Then, your ancestor?"

"Helped in the assassination of one of the King's greatest enemies."

"Ah! and you honour that past—I see it, by the way you speak. But your ancestor committed a murder?"

"He rid his country of a dangerous man, and shared in the building up of our French history, which our modern society too often forgets. It is men like these who carried to the last limits the principles of honour, their devotion to the Royal Family, and chivalry towards the woman they loved." Gaston laughed a short, strained laugh as he spoke the last words. His sneer was echoed by the screech of an owl who had made his nest in a tree close to the Château.

"There is a great deal about death in all you have

been telling me—death on battlefields, in duels, murders at the hands of a woman. Why was so much activity displayed in the service of extermination? Is history made up of battlefields and dark conspiracies? Is life not more valuable than death; and happiness more precious than sorrow? But you know—I am quite ignorant of the past.” The small lamp which hung down from the ceiling threw a soft light on Lucienne’s shoulders, leaving her dress in the shade. She seemed some mysterious mermaid emerging from the dark waters; and the suggestive apparition and originality of this woman fascinated Gaston’s fastidious temperament. She was so strangely captivating, and still so curiously uneducated, that he could not help smiling at the strange anomalies in her character.

“You are beautiful—what matters your ignorance?” He came nearer to her; she could feel his warm breath on her shoulders. “Your mind is pregnant with great conceptions, as your body, half enveloped in this mysterious shadow, is suggestive of hidden beauties.”

“Why do you say this to me?”

“You are right, why do I tell you what you know better than any one?” The young woman drew back a few steps and stood suddenly revealed in all her splendour.

“Let us leave this room. You are right, the wing of death is over us. It recalls a woman who ruled over events, who had friends and enemies, but who ignored the thrill of passion—she is no companion for you in your loveliness.” He held her arm, and the contact of her cool, soft flesh made his blood tingle. They left the room in silence, and went through a narrow passage, one side of which was decorated with the monogram of Diane de Poitiers, and on the other side were small latticed windows through which the moon shed her silver rays. His black frock-coat stood out in sharp relief against the white gown of the young woman; and her beautiful profile and rounded shoulders appeared silhouetted

like a medallion against the dark wall. They stopped in front of an oak-panelled door; he lifted the iron latch which fell back with a sharp click, and they once more stepped into a bedroom. But this one was narrower than the Medici room, and through the lattice window at one end of it came a long shaft of moonlight which divided the room in its entire length. Lucienne had a strange feeling of loneliness in this quaintly-shaped room; she held her breath lest she should arouse the memories of the past, of which this place seemed full. The silence was so oppressive that it gave her the strange impression of being suddenly deaf; so much so that at the sound of her own voice she started back.

"What is this room?" she looked round at the tapestries on the wall. The life-size figures seemed alive; and the mediæval damsels in their pink robes, and young men in brown hoods, appeared to beckon to Lucienne to join their frolicsome Courts of Love.

"This room recalls no tragedy, Madame. Death was not the object of the owner of it." The Comte was close to Lucienne; she felt his eyes fixed on her, and a cold shiver ran through her veins.

"It was the room of Diane de Poitiers."

"She was very beautiful—I know that," Lucienne hazarded.

"No," his breath was short, and he spoke in staccato sentences, "her beauty was nothing—it was her charm, her lovely body—her science in the art of seduction which kept two Kings under her thrall." Lucienne had heard of the great charmer of Kings. The quivering voice of Gaston made her turn her head away.

"There stands her praying-desk." She pointed to the delicately-curved chair.

"She did not use it when the King visited her." A sneering laugh was on his lips as he drew her attention to the other side of the room.

"There—her alcove. . . ." Seizing her two hands he murmured hoarsely, "Let us cease this comedy, and end this stupid part of a guide—you know well



that I am not here to teach you French history. It is too absurd, and you must take me for a fool to remain next to a woman like you, and not talk of love——”

“I see no reason at all why you should talk to me of love, as you call it,” and she tried to free her hands from his grasp.

“Ah, nonsense! you could have given points in the art of seduction, even to the divine Diane. Let us have an end of this nonsense; you must know that one cannot be near you without wishing to hold you in one’s arms.” He held her more closely to him. “Do you think that a man is going to escort a captivating woman like you, in this suggestive solitude, merely to talk of Catherine’s cunning and Diane’s wantonness?” Her whole body stiffened and repulsed his embrace. Her head thrown back, she refused to yield the lips which he bent forward to kiss. Neither spoke in this love-duel which was witnessed only by the silent figures on the tapestries, who must doubtless have looked with disapproval upon this ungallant lover acting against all the rules of Courts of Love. For one moment she feared defeat, and panted through her parched lips.

“Let me go! . . .” She heard the desperate words of love close to her; and with a supreme effort to free herself, she managed to loosen his arm round her waist, and rushed to the wall, leaning against the tapestry, her two arms stretched out in front of her.

“I command you not to come nearer,” she gasped. The figures on the tapestry seemed to move, as her body pressed against the wall; and the mediæval damsel in pink appeared to come down to the help of the outraged woman.

Gaston watched her as he would have watched a fine piece of acting on the stage. Her attitude was evidently part of the game, he thought; still, it was a little too tragic, and would spoil the fun. Passion did not annihilate in him the keen sense of criticism which even made him capable of judging favourably a scene in which the tables were turned against him.

He wondered how long she would keep up this indignant pose, and he was determined to see it through, although he did not want her to take it too much *au sérieux*. She was very fascinating, it was true, as she stood panting against a brilliant background of gay damsels; and he was not going to give up the game now that he had lost a couple of hours over this woman. She let her arms drop at her sides, and gripped the tapestry with her hands, when she saw that Gaston was again approaching towards her. He walked across the ray of light which divided the room in two. He enjoyed her different attitudes and gestures, as he would have revelled in the acting of Bartet or Réjane; her movements were graceful, her facial expression entrancing; her acting—for he never doubted it was acting—was perfectly *en rapport* with the strange woman she was; so subtly captivating, and still so primitive. As he came nearer, she fumbled more nervously with the thick hanging; very soon he would be close to her, and she would again feel his breath on her shoulders. Suddenly she felt the wall giving way under the pressure of her body—she held on to the tapestry, but still the wall seemed to disappear behind her, until at last she let herself slip under the arras, and disappeared through the door which had opened itself—as by enchantment. She understood at once that she must have unconsciously touched the handle of a door, and that she was in another room. She felt for the door and pushed it; it closed without a sound. She was in the dark, and no sound came to her ears.

For a minute or two she stood perfectly still, listening intently, feeling certain that the door would re-open to allow her pursuer to follow her. She waited, but nothing happened. All was silence and utter darkness. She wondered whether she were in a room or in a hall. She put out one hand, and felt a wall, it was cold stone; on the left her hand touched another wall. No doubt this was a passage; and as she could not stay there all night, she would have to walk as far as the passage would allow her

to. She turned round, and keeping to the right side of the passage, she carefully put her foot down, step by step, lest she might stumble over steps. The time seemed endless, and darkness and silence isolated her so completely from the outer world that she lost all idea of time, space, and environment. She was thankful to remember that Jean had not remained at the ball; after half-an-hour he had felt bored to distraction, and told her he would slip out unnoticed; she had assured him that she could come home by herself. What would he think now had he stayed in the ball-room? No doubt the Comte had given up pursuing her, and had returned to the reception rooms. She went on step by step; feeling for the stone wall on her right, and straining her eyes to pierce through the black darkness. She perceived that the passage must be winding towards the left; and it certainly sloped down, for her foot never came in contact with the ground when she put it down. When would this circuit end, and where would it land her? She could not help smiling at the Comte's discomfiture, and laughed at the mere notion of Jean's jealousy. Was this what he had dreaded? Well, there was no danger for her in that kind of admiration, as far as her feelings were concerned. It had, no doubt, been an unpleasant episode—and she had no wish to meet the Comte again—but it was over, and nothing need be said about it; certainly Jean would never hear of it through her.

Although she had not been more than five or six minutes in this passage, the time appeared interminable to her; and a shiver ran down her back as she realized that she might remain imprisoned in this dark prison, and that no one would ever find her there, or even hear her screams. She knew no fear, and danger had never as yet daunted her buoyant spirit, but the thought of Jean's anxiety when she did not appear, made her hand tremble on the cold wall. Suddenly she saw a glimmering light in the distance. As she hurried her pace, the little light dancing up and down in the darkness acquired a weird importance. At

times it appeared to be a long way off, and it even disappeared totally ; at other times it was quite close to her, and seemed like a will-o'-the-wisp to allure her to some unknown place. After many disappearances and reappearances of this erratic light, it suddenly became stationary, owing to the ground being level ; and as Lucienne approached towards it, the rushlight lengthened into a long ray. She was at last at the end of her journey, and in front of a door. Putting her two hands forward she felt the door up and down, and came in contact with an iron latch, which she managed to lift, although with difficulty, for it was very rusty. At last she pulled the door towards her, and entered into a room. At first she was dazzled by the light, after the darkness of the passage, and stood blinking around her. Having pulled the door to, she saw no sign of any lock or hinges when it closed. It was a spacious room, beautifully wainscoted, but sparingly furnished : a chest of drawers in plain wood, a few mahogany chairs, covered with old cotton brocade. On one side of the room stood a small iron bedstead ; and on the other side, in front of the window, was a large deal table covered with piles of linen neatly folded ; a small lamp with a green shade stood near the linen. Evidently this was a laundry room, or a maid's room. After having inspected the room, Lucienne saw a door in front of her. Where did it lead ? She would have to see for herself, for she could not remain here until some one came in. But before opening it she gave a look at herself in a small mirror hanging on the wall. The flowers at her breast were crushed, and her hair was ruffled. She pushed into place a few hairpins which kept the rich coils in order, and went bravely towards the door. As she laid her hand on the handle she noticed another door, close to the iron bed ; perhaps that one would lead her to a safer place. She hesitated, and was on the point of dropping the handle she held in her hand, but before she could collect her thoughts or analyze her impulse, she had turned it and opened the door.

She was in the Dowager's bedroom.

"Oh! I beg your pardon!" Lucienne's voice was so inaudible that the Marquise had not turned round. At the sound of the door being opened she had believed it to be her maid coming in, but seeing no one come forward, she had moved her head round and had seen the vision of a young woman in white leaning against the door.

"I do not know where I am."

"Where do you come from?" inquired the Dowager severely.

"I do not know where I come from—nor do I know where I am." Lucienne advanced into the room.

"You are in my apartment. But how do you come to be here? Where is my maid?"

"I have seen no one, Madame. I am Madame Darlot—Jean Darlot's wife—"

"Ah! But that does not explain to me your presence in my room, at this time of night!"

"I lost myself in the Château, Madame—I am very sorry—" she said, hesitating at every word.

"But how is that? The other door, in my maid's room, leads to the offices—to the kitchens and pantries. You must surely have seen some one there to direct you." The tone with which the Marquise pronounced her words was so authoritative that Lucienne could not dissimulate any longer, although she harboured no animosity against the Comte de Laumel, and had at first intended to shield his ungallant conduct.

"Madame, I must tell you the truth. Monsieur de Laumel offered to show me the historical apartments; in Diane's room he spoke to me in terms in which I cannot allow any man to speak to me—and—anxious to escape his attentions—I leaned against the wall, and must have touched the spring of a door which opened itself for my retreat. I found my way here through a narrow passage, and opened a door which led into your maid's room—this is how it happened, Madame." There was a silence, during which Lucienne stood motionless, her eyes fixed on the ground, whilst the

Dowager scrutinized the young woman in front of her.

"Yes—I am aware there is a secret passage leading from this floor to the tower. Strange that you should have touched the spring—but these things do sometimes happen. Now, you can return to the ball-room by my drawing-room, there," and the old lady pointed to another door.

"Ah! Madame! I beg of you—let me leave the Château unobserved! I do not want to go back to the ball," implored Lucienne, coming nearer to the Dowager, who looked at her attentively.

"It would be rather strange behaviour," said the Marquise, whose tone of voice had softened. "Your flight through the kitchens would most surely be commented on by the domestics—my grandchildren would hear of it—sooner or later."

"I beg of you, Madame, let me get away;" she was behind the Dowager's *fauteuil*. "Do not compel me to face Monsieur de Laumel this evening—later on, when all this has been effaced from our memories——"

"Still, going back to the ball-room is the one course which will not attract attention," interrupted the Marquise. Although she was annoyed at this nocturnal incident and showed a haughty manner to Lucienne, she still wished her to have the benefit of an honourable retreat.

"Let me think for a second, Madame, of some means by which I could leave the place unnoticed. I could not at present re-enter the ball-room, I should be afraid of betraying myself—as I have done before you."

"And who would believe this story of secret doors and this flight through dark passages!" quickly retorted the Marquise, turning her head brusquely towards Lucienne; but seeing the latter's distressed expression, she added in a softer tone, "To believe it, it would be necessary to have been a sort of chance witness—like me. But what is your plan?"

"This is it, Madame. Would you ring for your maid—tell her that feeling indisposed I had come in

here, ignorant of whose room it was? Then would you ask her to lead me across the courtyard to the drawbridge? In this way my retreat would have some kind of explanation, and none but you would know the real cause of my departure."

"You are free to do as you please," replied the Marquise, in an indifferent manner. "Be kind enough to pull this bell-rope near my bed." Lucienne did as she said. The Dowager followed every movement of the young woman. Lucienne's agitation and eagerness to get away had obliterated every feeling of awkwardness which she would otherwise have felt in the old lady's presence, and had lent to her a freedom and ease of manner which surprised the Marquise. Then there was something more than ease and beauty here; there was grace, harmony, which could not escape this well-bred woman of the world. The two women remained silent; the one waiting anxiously for her freedom; the other, watching with interest, and at times opening her lips as though she would say something. Steps were heard outside, and the door was opened.

"Madame la Marquise rang for me?"

"Do you feel better, Madame?" inquired the Dowager, turning to Lucienne with a faint smile.

"I am quite well, thank you, Madame. I have to ask your pardon for intruding as I did."

"Perhaps you will prefer leaving the Château without going back to the ball-room? Félicie, fetch Madame Darlot's cloak in the vestibule, and take Madame through the servants' hall, then tell one of the footmen to accompany Madame to the Bourg."

When the maid had left, Lucienne suddenly became aware that she was in the presence of one of the rare survivals of a great epoch. The agitation of the evening, the emotion of the scene in Diane's room, and her flight had held her senses enthralled, and it was only now that she realized her surroundings. She had often heard a great deal about the Dowager, and had frequently wished that she could see her. What a strange meeting was theirs!

"Will you ever forgive me for disturbing you as I have done, Madame?" Her voice was mellow and deep; it trembled, as she was anxious to leave a good impression on this old lady who had helped her to return safely to her home.

"Believe me, if I could have prevented what has happened, I would willingly have done so . . . I regret it *deeply*." Lucienne's voice had dropped to a deep murmur, and the emotion and emphasis with which she pronounced the last few words struck the Marquise so vividly that she bent her head forward, as if she were listening to a far distant voice; she was on the point of saying something, when she drew herself back and coldly said—

"You can wait in Félicie's room until she returns. One of my children might come in—it would not be advisable for them to see you."

"As you like, Madame." Lucienne knew by the voice of the Dowager that a hint was an order. She went towards the door, and holding the handle she turned round to look at the Marquise for the last time. The latter had never taken her eyes off Lucienne, and when the two women's eyes met, there was an instant of indecision on the part of both. The Dowager made a slight movement with her hand, as if to stop Lucienne from going, and Lucienne dropped the handle as if to come back into the room. But both soon repressed their first impulse, and to a bow from the young woman, the Dowager replied by a lowering of her eyelids, which was like the dropping of the curtain upon this strange scene.

After Lucienne's disappearance, the Dowager remained for some time lost in reflection, with her eyes closed. The silence of the room, into which no one would now come to disturb her, was as profound as the inner stillness of her soul. When she lifted her eyelids, it was with marked weariness that she gazed all round the room at the different objects which surrounded her. Her mind was gradually returning from its pilgrimage into the past, and her fretful movements showed impatience. She turned round



with effort in her arm-chair, and opening her bureau, she pulled down the lid, took out of one of the drawers a small packet, untied the ribbon, and gazed at a little miniature framed in purple velvet. Her features revealed no emotion, only minute attention. From time to time she covered the top part of the face with her hand; then the mouth and chin, again the forehead and eyes. She held the miniature close to her eyes, to examine it more carefully; then held it at arm's length. When she had done this several times, she wrapped it up again, tied the parcel, replaced it in the drawer, and once more closed her eyes to recall the face which she had been gazing at so intently. Her thin lips articulated some indistinct words, which she repeated slowly, but persistently, altering the tone of her voice, changing the accent as much as it was possible for her to do. "Deeply regret," were the words audible in the silence of the night. She shook her head in sign of impatience, as she could not find the intonation which would satisfy her auditory sense; till at last the strenuous effort of her mind acted as an anæsthetic over her senses, and drowsiness little by little silenced the voice. Her head dropped wearily on her breast, and she stopped a yawn, whilst her fingers fumbled about for the small bell at her side, which she rang for her maid to help her to bed.

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## CHAPTER VIII

NEXT day at luncheon every one was talkative. Gertrude and H  l  ne picked to pieces every woman or girl who had entered the ball-room the night before; the Duchesse de Vallorbes was in a wretched temper and kept bullying the Vicomte de Garjiac, who was not yet quite awake; Emma de Marsy was in great form, and talked at the top of her voice about the paper chase that was to take place next week, and in which the officers of Tours and Blois were to

take a part. Marie de Cardaillan seemed restless while she chattered to Gaston de Laumel. Edmond de Savigny was the only one who seemed thoroughly satisfied. He loved entertaining ; especially when it was all over and he could talk about it, and expand into endless details concerning the visitors, their pedigree, their income, and their political opinions.

This day would be a quiet one—relatively, a day of rest. Some were inclined to drive in motor-cars ; it would be the best cure for drowsiness ; others, Jeanne de Vallorbes and Garjiac, for instance, would ride ; whilst Vallorbes intended to read a new novel by Bourget in the library. Monsieur de Marsy had arranged to spend the day visiting the farms with Edmond de Savigny, for Monsieur de Marsy was a true country squire and thoroughly expert in agricultural enterprise.

Suddenly Laya raised his head.

"I say, Gaston, what became of the Nymph ? She disappeared very early."

"I dare say," replied Gaston indifferently. "I said a few words to her. Ah ! *mon cher*, what an innocent she is ! I mentioned the names of some of our ancestors who had shone in history—what *was* I to talk about ?—and she shuddered at the idea of political conspiracies, at duels, battles ; I felt as if I were talking to a child. She seemed so utterly strange and out of place in our *milieu*."

"Serves you right, Gaston. Nymphs are all very well in woods, but, good gracious ! *not* in ball-rooms," retorted Hélène.

"I suppose we ought not to expect anything else from a person in her position," continued Gaston.

"Anyhow, she is physically attractive !" exclaimed Vallorbes.

"Oh ! it does not take me long to sum a woman up," went on Gaston ; "there is nothing in her—humdrum bourgeoisie—perhaps a good wife—a good mother——"

"Bah ! My good fellow," exclaimed Laya, "there are only two sorts of women : those that we desire,

and those that we do not desire; the former are rarely honest, the latter are so from necessity!"

"And where do you class the women whom we—have desired, and desire no more?" indolently asked Vallorbes, under his breath.

"I maintain that your Nymph is a Phryne in germ. Wait for the time of her blossoming—it will come," and Laya drank off a glass of Bordeaux.

"Anyhow, there is a superb instrument there. Youth—*bond fide* youth—a throat and shoulders which would have enchanted a Phidias, and turned the head of a Pope; she has an atmosphere——" spoke Vallorbes.

"Ah! I'll bet you anything you like," interrupted Laya, "that woman has it in her—like all others—to fall at the feet of the first slouched-hat artist whom she ran across in some doubtful place. They are all the same—they love the mire—and the more beautiful they are the lower they stoop."

"Your conclusions are impossible about that woman; you are all mistaken about her. I accept your bet, Laya, whatever you like——" interrupted Gaston.

"All right," said Laya, "an automobile—a forty-horse power Mercédès!"

"What are you all arguing about?" asked the Marquis de Savigny, from the other end of the table.

"They are discussing the psychology of Madame Darlot," replied Madame de Cardaillan, looking at Laya through her eyeglasses.

"By the way," suddenly said Edmond, "I had a letter from Bernaerdt this morning. He says Darlot was in his studio for some time. Clever artist, but impossible views on art—believes in no school—no tradition. He does not know much about *her*, except that she is an illegitimate daughter of Pierre Dupont."

"Good heavens!"

"By Jove!"

"You don't mean it!"

"Well! that explains her gross ignorance; the mother must have been a *cocotte*——"

"No doubt," answered Gaston; "his *liaisons* were legion."

And on that the luncheon party had broken up. Each one on rising had some remark concerning Dupont, his mistresses and his political group. The conversation drifted into different channels as the guests stood or sat about in the large hall for the coffee.

"I say, Laya," said Gaston, who was smoking a cigar near one of the windows, "I hear your wife is at Trouville."

"Yes; launching out in the wildest dissipations," answered Laya.

"But she has her mother with her?"

"Oh! of course—her mother—for the gallery, and Victor de Terrac for—ha! ha!"

"Ha! ha! how cynical you are, Roland; nothing makes any impression upon you—you respect nothing."

"I have as yet found nothing that was respectable."

Every man had a story to tell about Laya; every pretty woman had pleasant or unsavoury memories to recall of his attentions. He was as charming a companion to men, as he was fascinating and enigmatic to the women of whom he took any notice. His intellect was subtle, and when he took flights into abstraction, he often reached a degree of idealism which strangely contrasted with his cynical judgment of life and human beings. To his mind, life was a song which one only sang once, and the art with which the test was recited, and the melody rendered, was the only important thing. He owed the Marquise de Cardaillan many a lesson in the art of living; she had been his first instructress in the science of love, and it was reported that he had paid her invaluable services over and over again. She was right in thinking that women did not interest him much—at least, women of the stamp of his wife and his mistress, or the wives and mistresses of his men friends. After having exhausted the world of the senses, he was determined to try the world of ideas. He was logical, like all the men of his race, who weigh and measure life and humanity as a problem of geometry.

Marie de Cardaillan had conquered him some years ago by her wit, her reckless fascination ; and he was now, at thirty-two, an expert in gallantry, though thoroughly sick at heart. For ever seeking something which he did not find, he believed he would strike the true note of his nature in the arena of politics. But a chain held him prisoner, and he could not sever it. He tried to forget his last interview with Marie, but do what he could, it was for ever in his mind. That one hour spent in Marie's room, after the ball, had appeared to him a century. That room, redolent with perfumes and flowers, sickened him ; knick-knacks, scent-bottles, petticoats, tea-jackets, chests of drawers disgorging all their contents, stifled him. Overcrowding and complexity were Marie's very life, although she was very practical in money matters, and kept her house in perfect order. She had looked so worn after the ball, and as she had come forward to greet him with her cajoleries, a strong feeling of irritability had risen up in him. Why had he come ? From force of habit, no doubt. But this time it should be final. This graveyard love was a hideous farce. He had held in his two hands her small, well-shaped head, and peered into her face, trying to recall these same features as they had been ten years ago. With his long first finger he had stroked the closed eyelids, to smooth the wrinkles over the blue veins. He had laughed softly under his moustache. From the eyelids he went to the corner of the eyes, and with his thumb rubbed gently the crow's-foot. She had felt the hard touch of his nail on her temple, and had shivered. He tried to lift up the corners of her mouth—they would drop and form two lines descending towards her chin. It would drive him crazy to watch that decay any longer, he thought. Lifting her chin with his hand, he looked at her neck—how depressing were these lines that gathered in a heap under her chin, and spread out like an open fan at the neck and breast. These lines seemed to hold his heart as in a screw. He would not bear it any longer. Ah ! it was the shadow of love, the ghost of passion ; and

she clung to him with all the despair of approaching decrepitude. But she was very clever, and her voice was the one thing which had remained eternally young and seductive ; and he still could be ensnared by its timbre when she murmured caressing words to his ear.

That evening Marie had realized she had lost her power over him, and she accused Time of the cruelty done to her. For some time past she had become accustomed to sit long hours before her mirror, watching the decline of all that had been her charm and power. She was racked, night and day, by the terror of growing old, and filled with self-pity and despair at the thought of not being loved any more. She felt instinctively that one day would come—sooner or later—when she would be abandoned, and it would be an evil hour for her, for she could not imagine what life could ever be without the interest which Laya had put into it. How flat, vapid, cruel each day would seem were this man to cease to love her, and to fill her daily life with his originality and seduction. She felt her heart sink within her when she thought of the day when all would be over. She loved with all the frenzy, the despair of a woman who loves for the last time ; and to keep that love a little longer she would be capable of anything. But to see him look at her with indifference, when she remembered his ardent, caressing glances, brought bitter tears to her eyes ; and to see these firm lips, when she recalled the passionate kisses which had answered hers, made her reel in abject terror. Although she sometimes felt the ground swept from under her by the overpowering violence of his nature, still she had felt so sure that no woman would ever now ensnare him. Her despair and jealousy were not caused by any visible rival, and she was convinced that he was now the prey to what he called the sensuality of the mind. She knew that her wit and her daring mind had kept him her slave for many years ; but what were the attractions of the intellect when once a man had counted the lines round a woman's eyes ? Beauty was the proper setting to wit, and she had lost her

frame. Oh! for youth, to possess that radiancy which that woman Lucienne possessed! She had an atmosphere, Vallorbes had said. Marie could no longer say this of herself, and she looked at the blue veins on her hands which were swollen like chords, and at the little brown spots, which some one had said were the sure signs of advancing decrepitude. She had had and still would have lovers—for all were not so fastidious as Laya—but he was the one man that held her captive. She feared him, and was his slave. She had never minded any of his escapades as long as he came back to her; but the day when she should be put outside of his life—when he would escape from her for good and all—that day would be a terrible one. And that day came, sooner than she expected.

One afternoon she was lying down in the library reading, when she heard the door open and turned round to see who it was.

“Ah! it is you, Roland.”

“Yes, I have come for a book.” He looked all round the shelves which lined the library from floor to ceiling. He took down a book, opened it to see if it were the one he wanted. Marie watched his tall, supple figure. He kept turning the pages, his long fingers holding the volume lightly, whilst his foot rested on one of the bars of a chair.

“How graceful you are, Roland! I do believe that if you were to commit a murder, you would manage to make your victim feel that he was in the wrong, and that it was you who were conferring an honour on him by killing him. Ha! ha!” and she threw her head back on the cushions and looked at him through her half-closed eyelids, and smiled with her lips just apart to show her white teeth.

“When do you return to Vitry?” inquired Laya, without moving.

“I don’t know—not for a week, at least.”

“I shall go back to Limeray in a few days.”

“Already . . .” and she lifted her head from the cushions. Her smile had vanished.

"Marie—it is time for us to face the truth." He continued to turn the pages one after the other. The voice was cold, and his manner calm.

"What truth?" hurriedly asked Marie, throwing her book down on the chair beside her.

"That we are tired of each other." He closed the book and laid it on the table.

"Is it all over, Roland? You do not love . . . no, no, do not say that to me!" and she sat up on the couch, holding her head in her hands.

"Come, come, Marie." Roland had taken the seat near her, leaning his arm on the back of the couch.

"Roland! life without you would be hell!" She spoke the words under her breath. "I could not bear it—think of all that has passed between us—you cannot efface it, do what you will."

"As long as we loved each other, it was—yes—all very well"—his fingers played with the muslin cushions—"but what is a love that has lost its interest? For Marie, we *have* lost all interest in one another."

"No, Roland, I never can lose my interest in you!"

"Bah! the love that lives on past joys is a ghastly farce. If we cannot find new treasures in our love, it is doomed. Let us part gracefully; do not let us be hissed off the stage."

"You love another woman?" asked Marie hurriedly.

"No, I should tell you if I loved another, for we can be friends, if not lovers any longer. For the present, I have done with sentiment——"

"Oh! *you* sentimental—my poor Roland!"

"Who knows?" and he looked at her as he half closed his eyes. "Certainly, when I first knew you, sentiment was not in your line. Who would believe that now you could cling to a love that is ten years old?"

"I cannot lose you;" and the wretched woman dropped on to her knees at his feet, encircling his body with her arms, her face anxiously lifted up to his. "I know, Roland—I am ten years older than when you first knew me—but I was not young, and still you loved me. All was true and real then—your



rapturous look, your trembling voice—even the other evening, after the ball—that was true also!”

“Marie, be reasonable.” He looked down at her, coldly analyzing her features. How all had changed! He could not formerly have felt her arms round him without lifting her into his, and forgetting the whole world at her touch. Ah! it was indeed all over between them. The spring and summer of their love had given place to a chilly November.

“It is too late to speak of reason. Your love is in my very blood; it is as necessary to me as the air I breathe—Roland,” and Marie dragged herself on to his breast, nestling her face in his neck. “Roland! it is impossible!” she hoarsely murmured.

“Allons, Marie!” He pushed her away by the shoulders, and, holding her hands firmly in his, he got up, lifting her up. “Marie, you are hysterical—and you are not young enough for that kind of thing;” and he laughed.

“And this is all you have to say to me!” She stood up like a tigress. “Not a word of regret—or of pity! But my satisfaction is this—that I have poisoned your blood with the slow poison of cynicism. I shall have known the best in you, and left the worst for you to suffer from——”

“This is a ridiculous scene, unworthy of a thorough woman of the world like you. Besides, tragedy does not suit your features—you lack the Greek mask.”

“You are right, Roland;” her arms dropped at her sides, “you make me feel ashamed of myself—and of you. Go now—there is nothing more to say.” They looked at each other, and in the hard, stony glance that passed between them there was nothing to recall to them any of the past love madness. He left the room in silence, and closed the door. She never moved—she seemed to have turned to marble; not a muscle of her face twitched; her eyes, fixed vacantly in front of her, were like a doll’s glass eyes; her half-open mouth resembled that of a wax doll who says “papa,” and, “mamma,” when it is squeezed. Presently she turned her head round, saw the book that had fallen

to the floor, picked it up, and carried it to the shelf from whence she had taken it. The movements of her arm and hand were childish, as if she had been hurt, and was crying inwardly over herself.

She left the library and went to her own room, put on a hat and walked out of the Château. She must move to shake off this frightful impression. She would go as far as she could, out of the park into the vineyards. She heard his voice ringing in her ears: "You are not young enough for that kind of thing." It was like a steel blade through her brain. That was the barrier that had grown between them, and which had turned them from lovers into strangers—worse even—enemies; for, could she meet him, and talk to him indifferently, after this cruel insult? She recalled the loving words he had showered on her. Ah! not long ago even—the caressing looks that had transformed her maturity into girlish ecstasy; and, "You are not young enough for that kind of thing," came back to her, cutting her heart in two. His keen sense of criticism had no doubt been at work for some time, dissecting her, tearing to atoms her beauty and analysing her attitudes. Oh! to feel that the man who has known every play of your physiognomy, all the various moods of your passion; who has been the artist who knew how to draw out of your soul the finest love-melody, is the very one to put to shame the symphony of your passion, to criticize the purity of the sound, and finally to throw the instrument away, because the tone has lost its fulness, the strains of melody have become discordant, and the style antiquated! She passed on through the vineyards, but saw nothing of the lovely evening which was descending slowly over the river, nor did she hear the song of the grasshoppers, nor the voice of the peasant directing his horse through the vines. She was haunted by the remembrance of love, and by the stinging pain in her head: "You are not young enough for that kind of thing." She heard his laugh: that subdued, short laugh, that pitiless mirth; and she became a prey to past recollections, beating cruel

memories into her brain, as the wind whips a dead leaf further and further on until it drops into the river and is drifted away—no one knows whither. The agony was so acute that she felt something must break—either her heart or her brain; and suddenly, before she could realize what she was doing, she laughed. No one was about—and she heard Laya's laugh echoing hers. Was it possible that her mind was giving way? She looked round, stood still, and heard the peasant calling to his horse as he went through the vines. She was coming down the road which crossed the whole length of the village, and which encircled the Château like a belt. She was not far from the Farm; and could see the windows. She would pass in front of it and look in, just to see what Lucienne was doing. A sort of wild longing seized her to watch her, even if the sight of her would be a pain. There was a hay cart close to the Farm; she stood behind, and saw through the window into the parlour.

Lucienne was sitting at the table, with the two children at each side of her. The boy was playing on a tiny flute, blowing out his cheeks, whilst the girl, her little hands stretched out, tried to snatch the instrument from him. Madame de Cardaillan could not hear their voices, but she saw Lucienne talking to the children; suddenly the little girl jumped down, and ran out of the room, and the boy, throwing down his flute, crawled on to his mother's lap. She saw the little round hands take Lucienne's chin, and the rosy mouth kiss her lips, as if it were eating a fruit. Marie felt her throat tighten, and two hammers seemed to beat on her forehead. She would have liked to tear these two mouths asunder. That picture of youth was galling to her who had neither youth nor child. She could have scratched that firm neck out of all beauty. "Ha! ha! you are not young enough for that kind of thing." Yes, it was all over for her; and this woman possessed in abundance all that she had lost. She represented youth in all its radiancy—"she had an atmosphere," as Vallorbes had said the other day.

Marie's heart was torn by two conflicting passions—love and hatred,—and her heart knew no more peace. She knew she never would be loved as Roland had loved her in the past. She looked at Lucienne's fresh lips, at her round and white neck and firm bosom. "You are not young enough for that kind of thing."

It is at such cross-roads of life that some abandoned creatures kill, either themselves or some one else ; but education and good breeding somewhat appease these outbursts of violence, and subtle cruelty replaces brutal outrage, according to the hater and the circumstances in which he is placed. The moment that Marie looked on Lucienne as a probable victim to her wrath, calm seemed to descend into her heart. She felt that she could ruin that woman's life if she set her mind to it ; and the knowledge of her power soothed her. Inaction was death to her ; she could not submit to owning herself vanquished without making some one feel her power ; and this woman, so calm and beautiful in her happiness, irritated her to madness. Everything in her provoked her ;—her home was modest, even to rusticity, whilst she was well dressed and moved about with grace. All this accorded ill with Marie's ideas of cottages and cottagers. It hurt her to go on looking at that picture of youth, and she turned away to walk home. Had she been a man, she would have drowned her despair in political discussions, or in manœuvring some daring financial *coup*, or in organizing an expedition to an outlandish country ; but there was nothing in which she could use her activity, except in hurting some one.

The twin-passions, love and hatred, had made a truce in her heart, and she had found an occupation in which to exert her energy and spirit of intrigue, which would make her forget the visions of the past. She had arrived at that pitch of recklessness when one is ready to degrade oneself, and all one holds dear, in order to satisfy a craving for revenge. She suddenly recalled Laya's bet at breakfast a few days ago. Ha ! ha ! How funny to play the part of destiny in that woman's life ; to drag her down from

her pedestal ; to throw a little mud at that lovely face ; to humiliate and belittle that radiant countenance ! To place her in the worst position imaginable, was now the fixed idea which haunted Marie, and she believed that she had the means of putting her scheme into execution. A prey to the fever of intrigue, and in her delirium, she believed herself cured of her love.

"Bah ! it is not so difficult, after all, to get over a great love. A walk—and it is all over ! Poor Laya," she thought, "how vain he is," and she laughed at the trick she would play him—she knew him so well—he could not resist the temptation of giving away a woman who would set her cap at him ! Ah ! she knew him enough to know that he would boast of a conquest even if he were decided not to reap any benefit from it—and then, after—how she would make him feel small and ridiculous !

She had reached the inner court of Crespy-sur-Roc before she realized that she was back. She went straight into Gertrude's drawing-room, where she found Madame de Savigny seated at her framework, embroidering an altar cloth for the parish church.

"Had a nice walk, Marie ?"

"Yes, I am in high spirits ! Have the newspapers come ? Oh ! what a lot of illustrated papers !" and she sat down with the whole heap on her knees.

"Here is a note amongst them, Gertrude—do you know ? Oh ! such a hand—your grocer, or a village urchin !"

"Neither one nor the other," replied Gertrude, her face bent over the work. "It is Madame Darlot—she can hardly spell—read it." Marie took up the letter.

"She writes to you *Madame* de Savigny—no title. Ha ! ha ! I see her husband is gone to Paris ?"

"Yes ; she writes for him, as he will not be able to finish the picture this week."

"He will be away until next week——" Marie laid the letter on her lap and looked in front of her, absorbed in her own reflections.

"You can tear it up, Marie, and throw it in the

waste-paper basket. No need to keep such a precious document." Gertrude got up to look for a skein of yellow silk in the chiffonier, turning her back to Madame de Cardaillan.

"Yes, it had better go into the basket." Marie got up and went towards the writing-desk, and, giving a side-glance at Gertrude, who still had her back turned to her, she slipped the letter inside her belt.

"Oh, Gertrude! it is nearly seven o'clock—I am off to dress!" and off she went, whistling a tune along the passages.

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## CHAPTER IX

CRESPY-LE-BOURG on ordinary Sundays, or Crespy-le-Bourg on feast days, were two altogether different places. Usually, only one or two old women and a few senile old men sat in Church listening to the faulty chanting of the vergers, and the despondent plain-song of the Priest. But, on feast days, men and women, young and old, high and low, mounted the little steep hill leading to the Church. Boys were unrecognizable in their new Sunday clothes; and the girls less free and easy, under their flowered hats and well-cut skirts, than they had been the day before in the fields.

The old women still clung to their thick black skirts and capes, and to the severe white cap covered over with a black muslin scarf, which gave them the aspect of nuns, and imparted dignity to all their movements. A few young women, although they still wore the prettily embroidered cap, had taken to the modern cut of dresses; whilst others, the majority indeed, had quite adopted the town hat, and went even so far as to carry a small leather bag in which they put their purse and handkerchief.

They all nodded to one another as they met on the steps; a few lingered behind in the square, bordered by lime trees, until the Château people had gone in;

not out of respect, but out of mere curiosity. The Savignys and the Laumels, when they were at Crespy-sur-Roc, attended Divine Service once a month at the Parish Church; whilst on other Sundays they heard a short mass in the Chapel of the Château in company with the Dowager, who was no longer able to drive down to the village.

The 15th of August was a great religious feast, the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, and the day being unusually fine, many had put on their best clothes and flocked into Church. When the mass was over, a party of children ran down the steps higgledy-piggledy, with a clattering of boots, and muffled laughter; then followed the older men leaning on their knobby sticks, and with one hand carefully holding on to the iron railing; whilst the women, leading their children by the hand, walked down side by side with their mothers or grannies; then the Mayor and his wife descended the steps and mixed amongst the peasants, waiting until the Savignys had come out. When these, accompanied by their guests, had bowed to the village dignitaries and to the principal vine-growers, they turned to the right and entered the side gate of their Park, whilst the villagers gazed eagerly at the smart Parisians who had invaded the borders of the Loire. That was all they ever knew of the inhabitants of the Château.

"Well, Monsieur le Maire," sniggered old father Louvier leaning on his stick, "you were up there, at the ball. Hi! hi! hi!"

"Ah! It was a fine sight, Louvier! There's no doubt that it is only the aristocracy who know how to entertain," continued the Mayor, bowing respectfully to the Comte de Laumel, "they do things well. Ah! you should have seen the receptions I have seen at the Tuileries. Hey! It's not like that any more at the President's," and the Mayor shrugged his shoulders in perfect contempt for modern festivities.

"I was seated close to the Marquise de Savigny," said the Mayoress, addressing Madame Roger, the wife of the richest vine-grower in the village; "she

talked to me a great deal ; she is very distinguished, and introduced me to the Duchesse de Vallorbes." The Mayoress' tight-fitting bodice threatened to split at the seams, and her small beady eyes rolled round and round with pride, as she bowed to the Marquise de Savigny, who nodded back to her with one of her most condescending smiles.

"Ah!" exclaimed Madame Véron, who was a widow, with a small grocery shop, which she found very unprofitable. "Ah! the rich do know how to enjoy themselves—well, money can buy anything."

"I hear Madame Darlot was there yesterday," inquired Madame Roger.

The village band was playing a voluntary, and the strident instruments vied with the highly-pitched voices of the peasants who were now crowded in the square.

"I think she dresses very much above her station—and certainly above her means." The Mayoress pursed up her lips ; she could not forgive the village seamstress for spoiling her black satin skirt ; and felt bitterly jealous of Lucienne for appearing at the ball in a white frock of her own making.

"If I were Madame Darlot I should not go to such places," said Madame Morel.

"Ah! but it is worse to leave the ball in the mysterious fashion she did!" said the pew-opener, pushing herself into the group. At this every one pricked up their ears ; men and women alike, all agog to hear a possible bit of scandal.

"Yes, yes, father Louvier's nephew, who was helping at the Château that night, told my boy that she had run away through the pantries, and come home with some one—who was not her husband."

"Bah! Louvier's nephew may have had a glass too many of Nazelles."

"Ah! no, Monsieur le Maire, my son had seen the artist come back from Crespy a good two hours before her," and she shook her head wisely, and winked mischievously.

"There come the Darlot children with their servant," said the Mayor, as the three entered the Farm.



"All the same," added the Mayor's wife, "I do think they might sometimes come to Church. It is not sociable on their part."

"I suppose she does not think the village good enough for her," sneered the blacksmith——

"Ha! ha! Master Vulcan!" This was one of the Mayor's jokes whenever he met the blacksmith. "The trade of loafer is doubtless more lucrative than yours. It is not Madame Vulcan who could flounder on the Castle's floor in silks and lace."

The warm atmosphere seemed to vibrate with the noisy laughter of the various groups gathered under the lime trees.

"I say, what are you joking about?" asked the Mayor, who had joined a group of old men.

"Hi! hi! hi!" Old Louvier was shaking with laughter, and his newly-starched smock-frock stood out like the short petticoats of a ballet dancer. "I say that a profession like his must be a downright fraud. You look at his picture—oh! it's all right! The river is as clear as water in the pond; and the trees, my word! you'd think they were going to move! I says to him the other day, 'Why, sir, it's fine what you are painting; why, with my seventy-five years' experience of the place, I couldn't do as much; but,' says I, 'one must see a bit nearer—one can't believe all one sees at a distance.'" Old Louvier winked with one eye. "And I came closer to see the picture;—and the nearer I got, the less I saw. I rubbed my eyes, and says I, 'It's queer though, sir, I see nothing now on your picture—only large patches of paint.' 'My friend,' says he, 'you must not put your nose on it; you must get further away to see the effect.' Ha! ha! ha!" and the old man leaned on his stick doubled up with laughter, which the strains of the village band alone could manage to drown. "I thought he was mad, and I says to him, 'Yes, you believe I go back fifty yards to look at a horse before I buys it; or that I go a hundred feet away to see if my vines have been frost-bitten in the night. Hey! One must have good eyes, and

open them wide so as not to be taken in, my dear sir,' says I!"

"Well, I suppose your artist did shut up." The blacksmith held his sides with his strong hands, and shook with laughter.

"Humph!" Old Louvier nudged the Mayor, saying as he half closed one eye, "He had not one word to say—he saw very well whom he had to do with."

"He won't humbug you any more," sneered the Mayor, patting the old man on the shoulder.

The villagers were still pouring out of Church and joining the various groups on the square; the sun, which was high in the heavens, lighted up the women's dresses, caps and sunshades; and the village band hurried the movement of the voluntary as the last peasants passed out of the Church.

"Here are the Curé's mother and sister," said Madame Véron, in a tone of pity. "You could not find anywhere harder workers than these two."

"Ah! what will become of them when that terrible Disestablishment is voted—for it is sure to come," remarked Madame Roger.

"Ah dear! oh dear!" moaned an old octogenarian, draped in her long black cape. "That could never come to pass in our country—we hold to the Church here."

"The village would be very dull without the Church ceremonies, for there is no society in this little place." The Mayoress was quite didactic when started on one of her long harangues. "How we should miss the bells, the Angelus in the morning and at night! For my part it cheers me to hear them, it changes one's ideas! The Church is our place of meeting; and we should very soon let ourselves go, were it not for our feast days, which keep us up to the mark at fixed dates."

"Just so," echoed the little widow; "life is sad enough without making it any worse."

"Yes, it is a reason for putting on a new bonnet or a new dress," continued the Mayoress, "otherwise, a cotton dressing-gown in summer, a woollen wrap in

winter is all we should ever wear down here. Then the young people, who have no other amusements, think all through the week of the new clothes they will wear on Sunday. You see, youth will be young, and the Church is better than the Assembly balls."

"That's quite true," murmured Madame Roger, whose only daughter had run away with a commercial traveller, whom she had met at one of these winter gatherings.

"There is no doubt about it," sententiously broke in the Mayor, "Church has a refining effect upon humanity."

"Ah! you are right, Monsieur," loudly spoke the blacksmith; "we need something to make us see that we are different from the beasts."

"To be sure," murmured the old woman in a black cape, "cows do not go to Mass—and the dogs don't think of the different feasts in the year."

"Ah!" and the Mayor nodded despondingly. "It is materialism that is the cause of all this."

"Well, I shall never get accustomed to hearing no bells," proceeded the Mayoress. "*Mon Dieu*, it would be terrible, this Disestablishment. The Church ceremonies are red-letter days in our monotonous lives here. Confirmation brings a little social animation amongst us when spring is budding out; it is the first step in a boy's or a girl's life. Then comes marriage;—it all helps us to take a lively interest in our neighbours;—and then comes the last ceremony of all. Ah well! they are our only recreations, and villages would be very unsociable without the Church."

"And then," added old mother Finot, who was wrinkled like an old winter apple, "if they take away our religion from us, how shall we ever know the different market-days, for they won't have any saints any more?"

"We can't live without religion, that's sure," broke in an old road labourer. "If they take this one, they will have to give us another, that's certain."

"What of St. Michel's fair at Amberlé, where I go and buy my cattle?" exclaimed one old peasant.

"Oh dear! and what of Ste. Claire's market where I sell my pig?" echoed an old woman.

"And St. Laurent, the patron of vine growers?"

"*Mon Dieu, mon Dieu!* I'm too old to learn new names. It's time we old people were lying in the Churchyard," lamented another.

"The world is going too fast—it's going to break its neck!" exclaimed old Louvier. Every one laughed, and on that the villagers dispersed right and left.

"I have not seen the Marquise de Cardaillan leave the Church, have you?" inquired the Mayoress from the little widow Veron as they walked down the road.

"No, I did not see her—perhaps she had a few words to say to Monsieur le Curé."

As soon as the square was deserted, Marie de Cardaillan came out of the Church and deliberately walked to the Farm; she entered the yard and knocked at the door.

"Can I come in?" she asked cheerfully; and without waiting for a reply stepped inside.

"Come in, Madame."

"This is your home, then?" Marie put her eyeglasses to her eyes, and looked all round the room. She went up to the easel on which a picture stood.

"Pretty," she murmured between her teeth. "Your husband has a future before him." She glanced at the furniture. "Quite like a studio—rustic and æsthetic. What a picturesque old farm it is." Turning towards the boy and girl who were clinging to their mother's skirt, "Your children?"

"Yes, they are very shy. *Allons!* Jean, Lucienne, come and say how do you do." The children half crossly, half shyly went to Marie.

"What lovely children they are." She took the little girl's hand in hers and was going to kiss her, but she changed her mind and patted the curly head instead.

"The boy is like you."

"You think so? Some say he is like his father—he has his colouring."

"Yes—with your eyes," and Marie took his little hand. "What a handsome man he will be—some day you will turn the women's heads."

"Have you any children, Madame?" asked Lucienne.

"No, I never had any," and she pushed away the little girl who was playing with her bracelet.

"How sad," murmured Lucienne.

"Why?" harshly replied Madame de Cardaillan, who had not come to be pitied. "The life of a woman of the world is so filled with social duties, that she has not time to be always with her children, as you have; it is only when they have to be introduced into society that we have a dose of them; but of course you are spared that social duty." Suddenly changing the conversation: "Do you know that every one is talking of your beauty, Madame? you have made quite a sensation in this little place." Lucienne looked at Madame de Cardaillan, not so much struck by the words as by the bitter tone of voice of the woman who spoke them.

"Ah! Madame, they must really be at a loss for a topic of conversation."

"There is one man though, who does not seem to notice whether you are beautiful or not," and Marie lifted her lace scarf which had dropped from her shoulders, "that is Monsieur de Laya."

"I do not know him——"

"Oh! yes," quickly interrupted Marie, "he offered you some fruit last Thursday on the terrace—a tall, thin, dark man—he lives at the Château de Limeray."

"Now, I recollect; but I am sure he is not the only one who takes no notice of me."

"*That* I do not know," coldly replied Marie; "anyhow, it is as well he should not notice you."

"Why, Madame?"

"Because——" she hesitated, and lifted up her eyebrows, "because he is the most dangerous man in Paris."

"That cannot affect me—I am not in your society."

"Ah! no woman is safe with him; he plays with a woman's reputation—whoever she may be—as a clown does with a paper hoop."

"I do not think Monsieur de Laya will be inclined to play with mine, he will surely find better sport in his own circle." Lucienne, who was looking at her children, did not notice the sharp look which Marie gave her ; but the latter quickly composed her features and smiled at Lucienne.

"But I have not come here—as you must have guessed already—to speak to you about Monsieur de Laya, but about a plan we have of organizing a fancy dress ball—a surprise for the Dowager's feast day. Have you ever seen a *bal costumé* ?"

"Never, Madame."

"Fancy that—you, with your beauty!" and she stared at her through her eyeglasses. "Madame de Savigny is to be Catherine de Medici, Monsieur de Laumel, Henry the Third, the Comtesse de Laumel, a Page." Lucienne had taken a seat near the window, and Marie de Cardaillan had turned in her chair to face her. "We must have a Diane de Poitiers, and *you* are the one we have thought of." Lucienne was on the point of refusing, and Marie saw her movement. "Now, *do* accept."

Diane recalled unpleasant memories to her, and she felt inclined to say no ; but the vision of the Dowager who had played a chivalrous part on that evening came back to her mind. The incident was forgotten ; why should she remember it, and keep any grudge against Monsieur de Laumel ? She had hardly exchanged two words with him since—a bow, and that was all. Her refusal might make a bad impression on him. Why not accept ? She would enjoy the *bal costumé* ; and then, she would like to see the Dowager again.

"*Do* accept. The costumes—at least the Diane de Poitiers—are authentic. They are kept in a chest in Diane's room. One dress rehearsal will be sufficient. My maid could alter it—if it did not fit you quite. Would you like to try on the costume ?"

"Yes, if you like."

"Then, that is settled !" exclaimed Marie, standing up and throwing her scarf over her shoulders.

"Would you come up to the Château one day to try on the costume?—let us say the day after to-morrow, at three. Come to the Diane room; you have been there?"

Lucienne hesitated. Did Madame de Cardaillan know of the incident of the secret door? Had the Dowager spoken?

"Yes—I have been there."

"Then it is all arranged."

"I feel very shy at taking such a conspicuous part in the ball—still, it does seem so attractive."

"Well, why should you not amuse yourself? You must be very dull here; and I am sure Monsieur Darlot would not object."

"Oh! my husband——" and the triumphant accent with which Lucienne pronounced these words made Marie's heart beat.

"Your husband is not jealous? He ought to be."

"There is no place for jealousy in such a love as ours, Madame."

"Ha! ha! you do not know men yet, I see, nor do you know life." Marie went towards the door. "The day after to-morrow, I shall expect you. Oh! by the bye, do not mention this to *any one*, until it is all settled. You need not ask for me when you call, simply say that you are going to the Diane room to get some painting implements of your husband's—they have all been put in there with the easel. Good-bye," and she was gone.

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## CHAPTER X

THE historical apartments looked very different by daylight from what they looked the night of the ball. Lucienne could not distinguish amongst the portraits in the picture gallery those that Gaston had pointed out to her: the ancestor who had fought more than three hundred duels was lost amongst the crowd of kinsmen in coats of mail or doublets, while the seduc-

tive ancestress who had been made notorious owing to the King's favour could not be distinguished from the galaxy of lovely ancestresses in farthingales and corselets. All the weird romance of Catherine de Medici's bedchamber had vanished in the broad daylight. The rich casket studded with precious jewels, to which her guide had drawn her attention, seemed more likely to have been the repository for *billets doux* than the receptacle for deadly poisons. The Guise assassination, the history of dark deeds of which this room was full had all disappeared; the sun came through the latticed windows in streaks of gold and dispelled the ghostly apparition of that night.

The footman led her through the passage communicating with Diane's room. It had nothing mysterious about it; the monograms which covered one side of the wall with their stiff initials, were anything but cabalistic when the moon was not shining across the windows and the owl was silent in his darkness. Arrived at the door, the servant bowed to Lucienne and turned back to the hall.

Once more she stood in that room. The stillness of the place, and the sunless light which came in through the only window at one end of the room, helped to bring back to her mind the scene of that night, and her flight along the passage. The gay damsels, and honey-tongued youngsters on the tapestry, smiled at her; they appeared to come forward to meet her, tripping lightly on the grass. She saw the chest of which Madame de Cardaillan had spoken—very probably the dresses were in there. Above it, on the wall, stood a Renaissance mirror; she saw herself reflected in it, and smiled at her appearance; the plain lawn frock, and white straw hat trimmed with cornflowers, were out of place in this sixteenth-century environment. She believed she recognized the spot where the door was; it was close to an Italian cabinet—she remembered it clearly. She touched the wall—no handle was to be found anywhere. Then she lifted the arras, and looked behind the tapestry. There was not the slightest fissure in the



wall,—no hinges, no handle, no key. Had she not seen the Dowager's room and remembered the presence of the old lady, she would have been tempted to think the whole adventure was a delusion of her senses. As she dropped the tapestry, she heard some one open the door behind her, and turning round she saw a tall, dark man enter ; it was Roland de Laya, who, after closing the door, bowed to her.

"Madame, I trust that I have not made you wait ? Three o'clock is striking now."

"Waited—I have not waited, Monsieur," replied Lucienne, astonished.

"I am happy to hear it. It is an honour for me to meet you here ; and I hope I shall not be unworthy of it."

"I do not quite understand . . ." she said, smiling.

"Do you already regret your first impulse ? Wait until there is a cause for regret, Madame."

"Why should there be ?"

"You are right ; indeed why should there be ?" and Roland looked at Lucienne through his half-closed eyelids. His manner was incomprehensible ; but she would wait patiently until Madame de Cardaillan arrived, and then all would be explained. She turned to the easel and gazed at the canvas which was standing on it.

"You drew my attention, Madame, from the first ; your beauty is too much a subject for admiration for me to mention ; but there is something more in you which attracted me—and to which, at first, I would not allow myself to give way,—your calm, your lack of coquetry, and a something fresh, untainted by the world made me wish to know you. Still I did not make any attempts to see you. I did not want to owe my closer acquaintance with you to any effort of mine ; for I have given up the search for love, and I believe in an unseen power which brings human beings together. Had I not formed my judgment and considered you different to others, I should no doubt have refused to come to-day."

She turned round and faced him.

"No—I was right," and the two stood looking at each other, "your boldness and ingenuity have turned the scale of fate ; you have power—single-mindedness ; had you been on the stage you would have risen to the highest rank."

"Ha ! ha ! ha ! imagine my being on the highest rank," and her face lighted up with mirth. "How mistaken you are about me,—I come from nowhere ; I do not know who I am, having no name . . . "

"Beauty is a sufficient name by which to designate you," interrupted Laya.

"No social position . . . "

"Happiness is your status——"

"No ambition, but to make of the present day—a long life."

"A symbol ! Better and better. I have looked for the woman who would be brave enough to be herself in the midst of all social complexities, and to defy the traditions of the Past—are you that woman ?"

"I have been taught nothing ; I have needed nothing but love——"

"And you will command it," bowing to her.

"Oh, do not believe that I seek any intrigue, any adventure—my life is a humble one. But I do not know why I am saying these things to you ; believe me I had no intention of talking about myself . . . "

She had come nearer to him, and laid her hand on the back of the chair in front of her. She felt she had to say something to him, to apologize for her want of reserve. The scene was so strange, she had felt prompted to tell him more about herself than she had ever felt inclined to tell any man. She had nearly forgotten why she had come to this room. There was a sense of unreality about the whole thing which seemed to paralyze her senses ; and the stillness of the room, the soft light, isolated them from the rest of the world. His silence seemed to mesmerize her, and she sat down on the chair folding her hands on her knees, looking in front of her.

"I believe, Madame, that you are very beautiful ; that you are captivating and interesting—provided

you do not spoil it all—but why should you ?” He stood behind her, leaning on the back of her chair. “It is that strange power that compelled me to accept this meeting.”

“Meeting—what meeting ?” she said softly, without moving.

“Do you regret it ? Your letter asking me to come here to-day ?”

“I wrote to you to meet me ?” she tried to realize the sense of his words ; and looking at him she saw a smile turn up the corners of his moustache—she hurriedly said : “Where is that letter ?”

“Ah ! Madame, I do not carry about these proofs of woman’s frailty—it has gone where others go—into the fire.”

“Ah ! but it is absurd what you say ;” she tried to laugh away his words. “Why should I write to you, you whom I do not know ?” and she turned to him.

“Ah ! such is the mystery of a woman’s heart ; but I see you are spoiling the game. I suppose I expected too much of you.”

“Let us cease this comedy, Monsieur ; there is something very strange about all this. You really mean to say that I wrote to you—— ?”

“Yes ; fixing this day and hour for a meeting.”

“It is horrible !” and she hid her face in her hands.

“Do not take it so tragically, Madame ; these things have happened before ; still, you are losing a good deal of your originality ; you were so much more interesting before.”

“Oh ! but it is impossible ; you are making fun of me !”

“It appears to me to be very simple,” went on Roland, bending over her, “curiosity induced you to write to me”—a movement from Lucienne caused him to hesitate—“then, a sort of feminine—what shall I call it?—self-consciousness made you draw back. Never mind ; I shall wait until curiosity draws you to me once more,” and he tried to take her hand in his.

“Ah ! it is the cruellest thing you could do ; and

why choose me as your victim? Let me go; it is diabolical," and she tried to release her hand from his.

"I am not easily humbugged, Madame; I warn you;" Roland spoke under his breath, and leaned over her, when the door was suddenly opened and Marie de Cardaillan came in.

"Ah! Madame! pray tell Monsieur de Laya that you asked me to meet you here to-day!" Lucienne had rushed to Marie's side and seized her hand.

"Bravo, Madame! My compliments! You are a consummate artist," and he laughed.

"I do not know what I have to do with all this. Allow me to ask what is the meaning of this excitement." Marie de Cardaillan withdrew her hand from Lucienne's firm hold, and looked her up and down from head to foot.

"But—you must remember the fancy ball—the surprise for the Dowager's *fête*," hurriedly went on Lucienne.

"Your imagination is indeed worthy of a novelist; but in this case it is strained to the pit of extravagance. Is there any fancy ball in view, Laya?" she looked at him. "The Dowager's *fête*, I believe, is in June," and she laughed.

"Dear Marquise, it is very difficult for me to give the lie to either lady," replied Laya, holding the back of the chair and tilting it as he spoke.

"A truce to your phrases; you know quite well this person is romancing. Besides, what are you both doing here? I come home from a motor drive with Laumel. I come here to look for a scarf, which I must have left here yesterday, when I brought those stupid people to see this room. Ah! I see it there, on the counterpane," and she went towards the four-post bed, "and I find you both here, showering conundrums at me. I confess; I think it is all—to say the least—very odd!"

"I beg of you, Madame, tell him the truth. This is a hideous comedy."

"How can I tell anything about your meeting,

Monsieur, since I find you here closeted with him ; it looks very much like a *rendezvous*. But why are you silent, Laya ? Speak ; say something. When I came in you seemed to be very attentive to Madame. I am afraid I have interrupted a very interesting conversation."

"Ah! *belle amie*, if you will listen at the door, you must expect your ears to get very hot." He was leaning now against the Renaissance cabinet, folding his arms. "If you had come in sooner, perhaps the scene would have been more interesting still. At least, the great King took precautions not to be interfered with."

"Ah! do not turn everything into buffoonery, *mon cher* ; you will end some day by breaking your neck in one of your clownish jokes."

Roland was beginning to get tired of this ; he saw that he had been fooled by one of them, and he was not going to allow the other one to turn the tables against him. In an instant he realized what he could make of the situation.

"*Belle amie*, you have come too late, and what you have interrupted was the epilogue of a scene already acted—not the preface."

"Roland!—no, tell me it is not that!" Marie rushed to his side, while Lucienne drew back, putting her hands to her temples.

"Ha! ha! *belle Marquise*, you have too much *esprit* to bear a grudge against Madame for reminding me of your charms."

"*Mon Dieu!* this is infernal!" exclaimed Lucienne. "But who is this man who plays fast and loose with a woman's good name?"

"He is my lover!" shrieked Marie, lifting up her head, and standing by Roland.

"Oh! dear Marquise, so little—so very little," sneered Laya, waving his hand in sign of denial.

"Oh! let me go—let me go!" implored Lucienne.

"Roland, you are diabolical ; go away." Marie went up to Lucienne. "This man is my lover ; and I forbid you even to speak to him."

"Please do not become tragic ;" now that he had adroitly extricated himself from an unpleasant *impasse*, Roland enjoyed seeing these two women measure their strength against one another. He backed Marie in this, for he knew, from experience, how unscrupulous she was ; but still, the other had proved herself to be a clever comedian ; and both were now the victims of his artifice.

"This room, with its souvenirs of gallantry, is not suited to your melodrama ; it seems to me that these figures on the walls are smiling at you, in derision, for spoiling the game of love. It is your misfortune to have come in too late, *chère marquise* ; accept it with your usual *esprit*, which has never yet failed you in critical moments . . . . ; allow me, Madame, to open the door for you ; you must be tired of this—ill-timed wrangle . . . ."

He walked to the door, opened it, and as Lucienne passed him, he whispered as he bowed to her : "I am grieved at this interruption—I shall wait . . . ."

He held the door for Marie to follow. She stood in the middle of the room watching him ; he had mastered her once more, she knew it, whether what he had said was true or not ; and there he was, a graceful conqueror, making her feel ashamed of herself. She looked down, her passionate expression relaxed, and her movements lost their nervous excitement as she came slowly towards the door. The power he exercised over her had broken her spirits to pieces, and she was again the adoring slave, ready to cajole, and to take back the broken thread of their *liaison*, if only he would take her back.

She laid her hand on his arm, and lifting up her face to his, whispered, "Roland, tell me it is not true !"

"If you and I had to tell all the truth about each other, we could not stand face to face one single hour !"

"But I cannot live without you, Roland."

"Even after what has happened ?"

"Ah ! I never could have believed it to be possible,"

and she came still closer to him, pressing his arm with her hand.

"You can go now ; Madame Darlot must have left the Château by this time. Turn out of the Guards' Room into the passage ; no one will see you at this hour."

"Ha ! ha ! ha ! do you think not ?" she murmured, as she pulled her scarf over her shoulders, leaving the room.

The dinner that evening was not a gala one, for a great many visitors had left the day before, and the Vallorbes and Marsys were the only ones, with Marie and Laya, remaining at the Château. Every one was in good form, the conversation was general, as the number of guests was fewer, and Laya, in particular, was more brilliant than ever. He knew he had given Marie, on that day, cause for tormenting reflection : he felt he held her under his magnetic power, and the game diverted him. That very morning he had sent an article to one of the radical papers ; the day before a leader of his had appeared in the *Echo de Paris*, the clerical journal ; and his friends were under the charm of his scurrilous but witty articles. Even Edmond de Savigny, the bigoted, smiled at his political extravaganza, while Gaston summed him up as a kind of Renaissance *condottiere* ; and they all forgave him his public and private misdemeanours, because he was one of their own set, and amused them. Anything might be expected from him, and nothing that he ever did would find them unprepared ; but, whenever he wanted to take himself, and his political escapades, *au sérieux*, and expected his *milieu* to take him as such, then they all cried out ; for, had they done that for one hour, they would have been compelled to disown him ; and they were determined to keep him in the bosom of society.

The Frenchman believes that the great science of life does not consist in living according to an inward struggle to be true to oneself, but in living according to a social system which controls the relations between individuals, and defines their duties to their social

surroundings. There is a logic of life to suit all classes of society ; and each member of these classes is subjected to it. There is a logic of life for the rich and for the poor ; for the bigoted as well as for the debauched. The French are a nation of rationalists and of sentimentalists ; hence their unpracticality and their complexity. A Frenchman, well brought up, well trained in the art of logic, and having all his mental faculties well under control, resembles a thorough-bred horse who capers in a riding-school to the voice of his master. But one wonders what that intellectual drill would amount to in the open air ; for, the great conflict lies between the mental reasoning of a Frenchman and his uncontrolled temperament ; and while he is master of his mind, he is the slave, often the mere toy, of his passions. That is very probably why the French are a nation of demagogues. They are carried away by the demon of revolt ; licence is their conception of freedom, crime their means to an end ; and when all has been pulled down, and hopeless chaos stares them in the face, then they erect the goddess Reason as their guide through life !

Laya was regarded by his friends as a past master in the histrionic art of living. He caused them to run up the whole scale of human emotions ; they shivered at his daring suggestions, quaked at his high-flown imagination ; while, at other moments, his sardonic sallies threw them into buoyant spirits. But however intense the sensations he made them feel, they never forgot that these were but the ephemeral passions of a clever comedian, and that he was not to be taken *au sérieux*.

Marie, who sat at the other end of the table, watched his thin face and mobile expression light up with the fire of his imagination ; she watched his long fingers as they raised his glass to his lips ; she shivered, for he had taken her heart in his hand with that delicacy, and in a moment of caprice had dashed it to the ground, gazing smilingly at the broken pieces. As long as he was close by she never would break the



spell ; but he was leaving soon—in a day or two from now—he had said ; and then she would pull herself together and bring out her claws from under her fur.

Next morning at luncheon, Edmond de Savigny announced that Laya had departed early in the morning, after having received important telegrams calling him back to town. Now she was free, and the moment was opportune. After lunch she went to the smoking room where Vallorbes, Marsy and Garjiac were smoking, and dropping into an arm-chair like a kitten into its basket, she related her adventure of the day before.

"Can you imagine my surprise ?"

"Well, the thing is not without piquancy," muttered Vallorbes, puffing at his cigar, "but, damn it ! it is not lacking in cheek either ; fancy choosing Crespy as a platform. Ha ! ha ! ha !"

"What a ridiculous position for Laya," said Marsy, leaning against the chimney.

"Very awkward for you, Marquise," slyly remarked Garjiac, who had taken his position on the rug at her feet.

"I should say more awkward for them !" replied Vallorbes, and they all laughed.

"What are you all roaring at ?" Gaston came into the room with his cigar in his mouth.

"Oh ! if you go and tell him, it will be all over the place in twenty-four hours," said Marie, looking coy. "He is sure to tell Hélène, and then, what I fear the worst would happen—the Dowager would come to know of this, and it might give her a fit——" Marie burst out laughing, "but whatever you do, not a word to Gertrude or Edmond. Ugh ! the mere thought of these two makes me shiver," and she shivered as if a blast of cold wind had blown over her.

"Bah ! the Dowager has passed the time of fits—I don't think she is quite alive. I believe she has already entered the valley of oblivion, where she is conversing with the eighteenth-century philosophers," drawled out the Duke, blowing circles with the smoke of his cigar.

"How the Duchess would enjoy this! I say, Vallorbes, do let *me* tell her this joke?"

"By all means, *mon cher* Garjiac; she does not inspire me in the least to tell her naughty stories."

"I wonder how long you will make me wait?" said Gaston. "I don't believe you have anything amusing to tell,—it has been raining, and you were at a loss what to do or invent."

"Well, if you will have it; but mind—not a word to Edmond. That person—the Nymph—*your* Nymph, Gaston," they all laughed and walked about the room; "wrote a *billet doux* to——" They all stood still and interrupted her.

"Don't tell him!"

"Guess, Gaston!"

"Say at once who it is!"

"The devil! Don't shriek so loud! How can I guess? Any of you?"

"Ha! ha! no fear," and Marie pouted her lips disdainfully. "No; nor you either, Gaston."

"Oh! I give it up," and Gaston flung himself down upon the sofa.

"You are an idiot!"

"Can't you divine?" and they all stared at him.

"Laya—you booby!" hissed Marie.

"Heavens!" and Gaston brought his fist down on his knee. "Then—that's why——" he suddenly stopped.

"Why, what?"

"Oh! nothing." He got up and went to look out of the window, then turned brusquely round and faced them. "And what of it? I am sure it will not be the first *billet doux* that Laya has received—*n'est-ce pas*, Marie? And as to the Nymph, well, she is playing her part of huntress."

"But that is not all, *mon cher*," went on Marie, stifling a giggle, "I found the couple yesterday afternoon, billing and cooing—do you know where?"

"How should I know?" impatiently replied Gaston. "I am tired of this catechism."

"Good God!" exclaimed the Duke, "fancy Edmond hearing of this!"

"In—the—Diane—de Poitiers'—room!" and Marie pronounced every syllable separately. It was Gaston's turn to burst out laughing. The idea tickled him, although it vexed him that Laya should have been successful where he had failed. What a humbug she was, to be sure! He wondered if she had told Laya about the incident of the ball, and related her escape, for she must have landed in the servants' offices. Gaston was not revengeful, and he had well nigh forgotten his infatuation for the Nymph; but he hated ridicule, and the thought of being made fun of by these two clouded his expression.

"It is rather commonplace—and I should have expected something more sylvan from a wood-nymph; anyhow, it is devilishly impudent on her part to come here to play her pranks!" Gaston went to the table where all the newspapers and periodicals lay, and took up a paper.

"But, you know—not one word to Edmond."

"Ah! *ma chère amie*, it's not likely. I should never hear the end of it; besides, I never speak to him except on Church history or farm products." Garjiac and the others were still making jokes over the incident. "I say, Marsy," said Gaston, taking up a paper, "have you read the *Echo de Paris*? Here is Laya's article."

"He is a perfect clown," remarked Vallorbes, taking up the paper, "and still, there is something in him which stops us from laughing at him to his face."

"He is thoroughly depraved," added Laumel, "and he has the courage to own it."

"That is his strength," murmured Marie, "and this power of his makes our weakness."

"Laya's success through life lies in this—that no one knows his vulnerable spot."

"Perhaps he has none," softly suggested Marie, leaning her head back against the arm-chair and gazing up at the ceiling.

"Ha! ha! ha! Achilles——" exclaimed Vallorbes.

"Without the heel," interrupted Gaston.

"Are you never coming to the tennis-ground?" Hélène burst into the room. "I have been waiting for ever so long in the hall." She took up a newspaper and threw it on a chair; picked a rose out of a vase, placed it in her blouse, and whistled a tune. "Come along, Garjiac, Jeanne is in an awful temper. Oh! I beg your pardon, Vallorbes—I forgot you were there."

"Never mind, *ma chère* Hélène; Garjiac will soon make her grin from ear to ear."

"Are you coming, Marie?" peevishly asked Hélène. She stood in front of a mirror, turning round and round to see if her white flannel frock fitted well round her boyish figure; she stood on tip-toe, looking over her shoulder to see whether her skirt was shut at the back.

"I have an awful *migraine*; excuse me, *ma chérie*. I shall stay here and rest, or read. I see you have *La Maison du péché*. I am longing to read it."

"Come along, Gaston!" Hélène left the room followed by the men, who turned round to Marie, laughing, while she laid a finger on her lips as a warning of secrecy.

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## CHAPTER XI

WHEN they had all gone out of the room and closed the door, Marie turned on her side, and putting her elbows on the arm of the fauteuil, she hid her face in her hands and sobbed. Now that the comedy was over she could be herself once more. She had sent off the ball of calumny with a kick of her tiny foot; and now it would roll along the passages of the Château, over the Aubusson carpets, under guipure counterpanes; between champagne glasses at dinner; on the green baize, where it would cannon with billiard-balls; down the staircase it would

bounce, and run full speed into the servants' hall; through the kitchens, where each one would give it a push, pick it up and throw it at one another amidst boisterous laughter and suggestive chaff.

Her revenge was not so sweet, after all, for it had left a bitter taste in the mouth, and an aching regret at her heart: that of not having prevented the meeting between Laya and Lucienne. Hang Gaston! Why had he insisted on taking the longest road home? She had begged him to take the shorter one, but it had been in vain. Once in a motor-car, Gaston was always too much excited to consult anything but his own desires. Had she been in time for the appointment, her revenge would have been as sweet as myrrh and roses, whilst now it was as wormwood in her mouth. No doubt Lucienne had left her reputation in rags in Diane de Poitiers' room, and would be the talk of the neighbourhood, so that her youth and beauty would sink under her shame. It was true also that no small amount of ridicule would attach itself to Laya. Ha! ha! he had won his bet; but at his own expense, and there would be no fear of his claiming his due. The slouched hat artist of music halls to whom Lucienne was bound one day to lose her heart—it was he—the fastidious man who had hitherto been so careful that his name should be coupled only with that of some queen of society—or of *demi-monde*. Fancy such a man as that falling a victim to the charm of an unknown artist's wife! To a nobody—whose mother was worse than that even—and whose attentions could but throw discredit on his reputation as a Don Juan.

But whoever could have thought that Laya would go to the *rendezvous*? Such as she knew him, she never would have believed it possible! That he should have scoffed at the letter; yes—that he might have done, and Marie had felt certain he would show it all round, and make fun of the woman who had penned such an amorous *cartel*. But that he should remain silent about it, and answer the challenge in person, that was what astounded Marie.

What did it mean? When she recalled the scene, she felt a sickening feeling at her heart. Was it possible that she had been outdone by these two? She tried to reason with herself, and to pooh-pooh the haunting idea that she had arrived too late. Still, everything was possible with a man like Laya, and his look as he had told her that cruel and cynical thing had made her shudder. She had now to live up to this revenge of hers, whatever it led her to. Ah! for one of his long caressing looks that thrilled her to frenzy! She felt a tightening at her throat as she remembered past joys. Left alone in the world, she would never more hear that voice whispering in her ears. Sobs convulsed her whole body; her hands covered her face, whilst her nails burrowed in her masses of yellow hair. The book that lay on her lap fell on to the carpet with a thud.

And the ball did roll. It was started on its course by the kick from the foot of Jeanne de Vallorbes to whom Garjiac had thrown it. How they laughed these two! For it gave the Duchesse an opportunity of coming out with one of her coarse remarks. She compared Lucienne and her introduction into smart society to a naughty child fondled on its nurse's lap, who has to be put down and chastised for forgetting herself! Ha! ha! Garjiac thought it such a droll idea that he repeated the joke to the Duke.

"My dear fellow, it is only to you she comes out with such amusing remarks," Vallorbes had answered.

Naturally the Duchesse lost no time in pushing the ball towards Hélène. These two were chums, although rivals in the art of impertinence. Between them it was a race as to which would outwit the other in effrontery, and whether the upturned nose of the Comtesse could look more insolent, or the huge mouth of the Duchesse would emit the rudest sallies. Hélène picked up the ball as she would have done a ball at tennis, and in sporting mood threw it towards Emma de Marsy with a shout of "Play!" With Emma it acquired a Yankee twang which added dash to the tittle-tattle. It might have ended its course

there but for Hélène, who, notwithstanding her constant friction with Gertrude, could not resist acquainting her with the news. The indelicacy of the incident would be sure to bowl over the prudish descendant of warriors who had fought for their kings under the banner of the Virgin Mary! It would really be as good as going to the music halls to watch Gertrude's demure countenance at the recital of such barefaced shame. The ball was growing in its course, and, as it landed on the hem of Gertrude's dress, it was not any longer a light, bouncing tennis-ball, but a huge, dark, threatening shell on the verge of explosion. Gertrude did not delay, but from a scrupulous sense of duty, and also perhaps from a view to self-preservation, gave it a good kick forward, and the dangerous projectile burst in front of the Dowager!

Gertrude was the general and safe informer of every event, incident, or piece of gossip, and the faintest suspicion of a scandal was sure to be whispered all round by this faithful and vigilant guardian of virtue. On this point, as on most others, she and Edmond understood each other. They both firmly believed that worse scandals were averted when the culprit, or culprits, had their shame brought home to them; not that they personally would tax the guilty ones openly with it, oh! no, but they exerted their mental powers to spread about the news, and make it as public as possible by the means of private gossip. Edmond had always disapproved of rising artists; they were all right in their studios, he considered, but out of there, there was no saying what they would do. As it happened, Darlot had not struck him as being such a Bohemian as others he had come across. Well, it only showed how little appearances go for. As for the wife, it was the greatest mistake ever to have brought such a person amongst them. "Gaston was the cause of it all; and I do believe the poor fellow rues the day he ever asked them here."

"Poor Gaston," simpered Gertrude, "he loses his head at times, and forgets society's *bon ton*, through

frequenting his Aunt Valérie's house. Heaven only knows what kind of women he meets there!"

"It is very awkward for us having such people as these in our quiet little village; for that woman will go far. You'll see, we shall hear of her sooner or later."

"I should say that what we have heard already is quite sufficient. I have a great mind to have the historical apartments closed."

"I think you are right," replied Edmond. "There is such a thing as criminal contagion; and, who knows what might happen next? Well, I can only repeat that I always was unwilling to receive that artist here."

"Yes, *mon cher* Edmond, so was I. But I think our Grandmother ought to know this. She is the head of the family, and she ought to be aware of such a disgraceful thing."

"H'm! she is very tired and very indifferent," Edmond rejoined. "I do not know whether she takes in as much as we give her credit for; but still, as you say, it is our duty to inform the head of the family of every important event. You are, no doubt, the proper person to acquaint her." Edmond was delighted whenever there was a family rumpus and some one had to be censured, but he invariably hid behind his wife; in fact, he did not care to face the music, whatever the tune might be—a Scotch reel or a Symphony.

Now that the gay house party had broken up, and that Crespy was once more quiet, Gertrude would find an opportunity of telling the Dowager, in the intervals of reading her the news in the clerical newspapers. She was in the habit of imposing her company and her views on things in general on her Grandmother after luncheon; and although she showed a certain deference to this aged descendant of the Maréchal de Crespy, still there her respect stopped; for she did not make the smallest concession to her Grandmother's opinions, although the difference of age between them was so great; and regardless of the Marquise's mood, she persisted in reading aloud to her each day extracts



from the religious journals and Royalists' newspapers. She never, by any chance, offered to open one of those dangerous books which were piled up on the small Empire table beside the Marquise, but simply ignored the existence of such subversive literature.

Sometimes these dreary readings were interrupted by comments on the topics of the day, as, for instance, the closing of the convents; and she would inform the dowager of the brave conduct of the Comtesse So-and-so, and of the Marquise X. Y. Z., who had shown their personal disapprobation, and even gone so far as to let themselves be arrested by the gendarmes who objected to their shouting: "Long live the Nuns!"

"Ah!" she would exclaim, "if all Frenchwomen behaved with such courage, these terrible things would not happen!"

At times, she would read aloud a paragraph from a society paper, or mention some Parisian scandal of which a well-known woman of the world had been the heroine. She was inexorable in all questions of morals, and never forgave a woman for straying out of the right path. Had any one tried to recall the Gospel of the adulterous woman, she would doubtless have replied that it befitted a God to forgive, but that we poor sinners had to show the example of Christian virtues in punishing the culprits; that we had to be emphatic in our love for goodness and our hatred for evil; especially in such times as ours, when society was threatened by political and social upheavals of all kinds.

The Dowager listened in silence to the reading and the commentaries without showing any signs either of pleasure or displeasure. Was it patience, or indifference which made her lend a silent ear to this empty tittle-tattle? Or was it not rather the impassivity of the Sphinx peering forth into space, where there is neither time nor distance? Very aged people, who still retain all their faculties, have these profound silences and long patient looks, which seem to give them a foretaste of eternity.

When Gertrude related to her Grandmother the scandal that had stirred the Château from the drawing-room to the servants' hall, the Dowager listened with an enigmatic smile upon her wizened face. She mentally recalled the night of the ball, and wondered whether her grandchildren were not mistaken, and if the adventure, having passed from mouth to mouth, had not lost a good deal of its accuracy. She was very fond of details, and as she could not obtain from Gertrude enough to satisfy her, she relapsed into platitudes, and said that she had heard a great many scandals in her life, after her marriage, when she was permitted to hear and talk of such things. She took flights into the Napoleonic period, speaking of Madame de Staël's unrepressed passions, and Madame Recamier's amorous friendships. She told Gertrude of the scandals under Louis XVIII., Charles X., and Louis-Philippe's court, which seethed with, not only suggestive, but vulgar intrigues. As to the Second Empire, heaven knows that it had beaten the record in scandalous debauchery; and now under this Republic, society's morals were certainly lacking in nicety, if not in common decency. It was not likely that the recital of illicit amours would astonish a member of society who, owing to her advanced age, had witnessed the laxity of morals under four Governments. Was not Marie de Cardaillan's *liaison* with Laya accepted here under their very roof, and even sanctioned?

"I suppose this will put an end to it?" Gertrude had remarked, smiling and showing the gums of her teeth. This was another side to this shameful affair; one which had not struck her at first; and in her heart she felt a thrill of satisfaction at the idea of Marie being at last defeated in that game of love, in which, to her prejudiced mind, the man was merely carried away by the craftiness of woman, who was invariably the aggressor. But if the Dowager was not to be roused from her philosophical acceptance of evil, she was at the same time punctilious about the manner in which these intrigues were carried on, and

very meddlesome about details ; for, to her mind, the way in which a thing was done was much more important than the thing itself ; and the incongruity, the bad taste of an incident, was more to be blamed than its indelicacy.

"My dear child, what an extraordinary thing for Madame Darlot to make an appointment in that room ! And how strange that Marie should happen to go there just at the same time !"

"One thing is certain, that that person was in the room with Monsieur de Laya. Besides, Marie is not likely to invent a story about him whom we know to be——"

"Her lover," interrupted the Dowager. "Still, it is very odd for a stranger to fix a *rendezvous* in a place like this—and rather risky too. Did any one else see Madame Darlot besides Marie ?"

"Yes, indeed ! My maid, whom I questioned, had seen her come out of the Guards' Room ; and, waiting a little time, she saw Laya come out soon after. If that is not sufficient evidence, I do not know what more you want, my dear Grandmother !"

"Humph ! I suppose it is the evidence of a fact," and she gripped the arm of her *fauteuil* with her right hand, "appearances are sometimes deceptive. Who could have believed——" and the vision of Lucienne as she had appeared to her on the night of the ball passed before her eyes.

"Why should not a beautiful woman kick over the traces ?" said Gertrude. "You have never seen her—besides, her manners are rough, and she takes our condescending politeness as her due. But, what can one expect from a woman who is not married at Church and whose children have not been christened ?"

"I suppose you knew all this when you asked her to the ball ?" and the Dowager turned sharply to Gertrude. She was always delighted to corner people, and to convict any of her *entourage* of some glaring inconsistency.

"My maid told me some time ago. That person, Madame Darlot, has no shame, and has no compunc-

tion in talking about it; indeed, she boasts of it, for all the village knows it. A dreadful example for them."

"Is the Curé aware of this?" asked the Dowager.

"It seems impossible that he should be unaware of it; but I do not wish to mention the matter to him—nor does Edmond. We should very likely be carried away into saying more than we should wish. I think the Curé lacks firmness; he is too easy-going."

"He is a peasant," replied the old Marquise, lifting up her small head with dignity.

"Believe me, my dear Grandmother, we did our best to keep all this from you; it was only when we thought it right that you, the head of the family, should know the facts as they are, that we decided to tell you. But we hid it from you as long as we possibly could."

"And I hope you will continue to hide gossip from me in future, my dear child," replied the Dowager, darting towards Gertrude one of her swift glances which would have reduced to silence the most loquacious of scandalmongers.

The village seamstress was the first to inform the Mayoress of the scandal. She knew Gertrude's maid very well, and her tongue wagged as quickly as her needle was slow. That evening the Mayor was entertained at dinner by his wife with all the details of this gossip; and he could not help smiling and pulling his grey moustache at the suggestive story, for it recalled several of his own intrigues, in various countries, when he was a commercial traveller. He even went so far as to relate to his wife some of his risky tales, feeling quite elated by Madame Darlot's adventure, coupled with a bottle of old Vouvray.

"Hold your tongue, Auguste!" she had exclaimed, "this is no matter to trifle with. There is no reason why merely because she is a fine woman she should come and upset a quiet village like ours."

"I think you had better leave the matter alone," said the Mayor.

"In my position, it is difficult to know what to do—between the Farm and the Château," piteously remarked the wife.

"It is just on account of our position that it is better that this gossip should not be laid at our door."

"Bah! what is she, after all! A bastard they say, whose father was one of them who shot at priests and women in '71, in the Commune; and as to her mother, ah! one can well imagine what *she* must be like."

"Well, what of that?" replied the Mayor, who found in the bottom of his glass a simpering tenderness for pretty women who had slipped on the thin ice of life. "After all, they pay their rent, and behave all right outwardly; we have eaten many a good meal at the Farm; you had better leave the rest to take care of itself."

"Look! here she goes with her brats," suddenly exclaimed his wife, pointing with her knife to the window. "It is extraordinary how an artist—" and she picked the bone of a chicken, "can afford to dress his children like that—they are not better dressed at the Château," she wiped her greasy mouth with the napkin tucked under her chin.

It was not so much Lucienne's beauty and innate elegance that irritated this good lady, as the beauty and health of her children; for there was a stillborn drama hidden behind this mass of pettiness and pose. Years ago her first and only child had died, two days after its birth; and the memory of those little dimpled hands, and of that plaintive whining voice only heard for a short time, had furrowed deep lines at each side of her mouth. Each time that Lucienne's children came near her, she would at first feel drawn to kiss them, then a second impulse would make her draw back to scrutinize every article of their little toilette, with a heartrending look that jealously grudged all they had on; whilst her mind called up the picture of a little cold body buried thirty years ago. She blamed the mother for the way in which she dressed her children, and was pleased to disapprove in another what she herself would have been the first to do. From these envious eyes streams of tender love would naturally have poured; from these purple lips, sweet words of endearment

would have escaped ; but, to inflict suffering for the sorrows one has borne oneself, seems to be a consolation to those who regard the law of retaliation as a sacred precept of the Scriptures. Lucienne had been told of the Mayoress' past grief, and she had gone to her with a woman's heart and a woman's tact, setting on one side the meanness which annoyed her in the pretentious woman. But the latter did not understand Lucienne ; she was too much absorbed in her village officialism to trust the young woman's straightforwardness ; whilst the banale welcome of the Château folks, whose aristocratic and haughty manners flattered her conceit and wounded her pride, made her behave unjustly towards Lucienne, whose sympathy she suspected of being condescendingly patronizing. One of her principal grievances against the artist's wife was her absence of class animosity. She could not understand how any one could be as much at their ease in the Savigny's drawing-room as in a peasant's cottage ; and what to any one else would be a sign of culture, appeared simple effrontery in the eyes of a woman who could never forget her humble origin when she found herself at Crespy-sur-Roc.

She determined to speak her mind to the Curé—of course the Mayor and he were the authorities in the village ; and between them was a bond—a moral bond—to keep each other posted up in all matters of gossips. Under one pretext or another the Mayoress used frequently to call at the Presbytery with her batch of gossips ; one day it would be to get some chervil, another day the excuse would be to ask for a few bunches of grapes out of the garden ; this time she thought of begging for a few tomatoes.

She found the Abbé Martin in his garden, wearing his shabby old cassock, without a collar, unshaved, and altogether dejected in appearance, as he felt in his heart. He had vainly tried to rake the little alleys of his garden, but lassitude had overcome him, and he stood forlornly wiping his forehead with his handkerchief. The rake was thrown amongst the trees, whilst the empty water-can lay neglected in a

flower bed, looking as though it had not been used for days.

He had heard the gossip ; but he sneered at the importance the Mayoress attached to it. Of course he never had thought it very wise of Madame Darlot to accept all the invitations to Crespy, and he did not consider that the Château and its inhabitants were the proper environment for an artist's wife, although his mission as a disciple of Christ was to disregard and combat social conventionalities and class distinctions.

"The husband ought to be made aware of all this!" and the Mayoress looked down upon the tall form of the Priest bending over his tomato plants.

"He was a fool to let her go where she has no business to be," and he cut the tomatoes and laid them in a basket.

"You should hear my husband talk about artists—he has known many—they are not worth much," she peevishly remarked, touching the fruit complacently. The Curé did not reply.

"Some say they are not married—you ought to know, Monsieur le Curé—is that true?"

"It is not my business to inquire into these people's affairs—they are strangers," and he drew himself up, handing the basket to her.

"Thank you very much for the tomatoes, Monsieur le Curé ;—it is my husband's favourite dish."

"You are welcome to them, Madame;" the Curé stood awkwardly twisting the garden-shears in his fingers. He did not cut any flowers for her, as he usually did ; the last time she had called for some lettuce, he had gone from the rose trees to the mignonette bed, and thence to the carnation borders, cutting right and left, with a fluency of speech which had impressed the Mayoress and made her say to her husband that the Curé was very good company ; but, this time, his arms hung inert by the side of his despondent body. His pale face and unkempt appearance made him look morose, and his dull round eyes gazed through his eyeglasses straight in front of him.

He was glad that Darlot was away, and would be

for a few days still. All these rumours must have some foundation, and whatever it was that had really occurred was sure to have pained Lucienne—women were so emotional; they hid their feelings with difficulty, and rarely foresaw the consequences of their actions.

He remembered quite well having seen her come home some days ago, and being struck by her hurried walk and distressed countenance; but he had abstained from calling on her, lest she might think he was coming to spy upon her. Next day he had watched her going out, and observed that every sign of anxiety had vanished from her expression. A smile had parted his thick lips as he thought to himself, "What is the use of worrying about a woman's troubles when she herself does not think any more about them?" He had dismissed from his mind the idea that Lucienne had purposely met Monsieur de Laya at the Château; but he intended one of these days to inform Darlot of the silly reports spread in the village, which he no doubt could stop better than any one by preventing his wife from going too often to Crespy.

When Lucienne returned to the Farm after the scene in the Diane Chamber, it seemed to her as if life had changed, and that beneath the songs of the birds was heard a shriek of agony. It was only when her children's voices welcomed her back that she forgot for a short time the cruelty of the past scene. She had gathered from the Curé that Madame de Cardaillan was Laya's mistress; and she felt intense pity for the woman whose life was so empty—no child, no husband—ah! who could judge of a woman's heart, when it was overflowing with love, and when life had taken away from her all joys? Love was love, after all; and if Laya's devotion filled her heart, who dared say anything against it? She recalled his entrance into the Diane room, and his strange words; and although their meaning had seemed obscure to her, she had felt somehow drawn towards the man who later on had insulted her. If



only what followed had never happened ! How could a man have behaved as he had done ! It was true Madame de Cardaillan had warned her, and said he was capable of ruining a woman's reputation for a mere caprice. But what reason had he to ruin hers ? And why had Madame de Cardaillan denied having fixed the appointment ? Was it some infernal plot planned by both of them to ruin her ? The idea seemed so absurd that she laughed aloud. She was too healthy and well-balanced to dwell morbidly on life's complexities ; and under the influence of her children's caresses, she gradually lost the aching pain at her heart. Her surrounding helped, moreover, to soothe her troubled mind. The piano in one corner brought back the memory of lovely sounds, when Jean had taught her to love and appreciate good music ; the easel, paint brushes, palettes in another corner of the room, placed her back again in her proper *milieu* ; and she felt once more in touch with the realities of life. What could be wrong when she felt the wholesome atmosphere of her home around her,—when her children were on her lap, nestling in her arms, and when Jean himself was coming back soon ? She counted the days, the hours, until his return, and thought how they would then resume their simple life together, and turn over for ever that page which had brought such bitterness to them. She was sure her husband would not miss the society of the inhabitants at Crespy-sur-Roc. He would now be able to finish the sketch of the river at the Farm ; and here would end the first and last introduction to a world which could never be hers. Only one face came before her eyes ; that of the Dowager. She had more than once thought of their strange meeting on the night of the ball ; and to see her again Lucienne would have braved much. Was it not for that very reason, that she had consented to go to try on the dress at Madame de Cardaillan's instigation ?

The whole thing had been a bad dream, out of which she would wake in Jean's arms, where no harm could ever reach her.

## CHAPTER XII

"Now, Jean, what is the matter with you? At supper you had nothing to say to me—the children have gone to bed—tell me." Lucienne came up to him. "Have I displeased you?" and she sat on his knee.

"No—it is nothing." He tried to push her away.

"Yes, yes, there *is* something—you would not push me away for nothing." Her face was close to his, and her dark eyes were searching in his for the cause of his wrath. Hypnotized by her look, he gave way, and holding her by the shoulders, exclaimed:

"What is this story about you and Monsieur de Laya?"

"There is nothing." Lucienne was prepared for this; she had braced herself up ever since the meeting at the Castle. She gave him back look for look, and in that minute they measured their strength.

"Why do you say 'nothing' in that way? Did you know what I was going to say?"

"No; but I can well imagine what can be said, or invented in a small village: but *I* surely must know what truth there is in it. Who spoke to you of such nonsense?"

"Tell me the truth, Lucienne; I wish to know it."

"Then why did you refuse to answer my questions a minute ago? If you wished to know, you ought to have asked sooner—why wait until to-night?" She tried to collect her thoughts, to search in her mind what she could tell him, and what she ought to conceal, not for herself, but for him, to spare him pain and anger. How puerile the incident with Gaston de Laumel seemed when compared with the adventure with Madame de Cardaillan. Poor Jean! why should he be acquainted with such hideous intrigues? She was strong enough to bear all this alone.

"Will you tell me at once?" He held her hands in his iron grip, and his words came out hoarsely through his clenched teeth.

"Yes, but will you listen to me? Will you believe

me?" Seeing him so terribly moved, she controlled herself. "Why should I speak if you disbelieve me?" she added coldly.

"Forgive me, Lucienne. . . . I am not myself—I am upset."

"By whom?"

"By the Curé—I dare say he did it with a good intention."

"What is it?" It was her turn now to command, and exact an explanation.

"Well, he says that the village is talking about you and that man—that you were seen leaving the historical apartments with him—that you had already been seen on the night of the ball, leaving the Castle with a man."

"Ha! ha! Is that all? First of all, I did not leave the night of the ball with any one but a servant—I told you that already—I had felt unwell, and one of the maids took me to the drawbridge through the servants' offices. As to the other story, it is a perfect fabrication. I went to fetch your painting brushes—for fear they might get spoiled until you returned."

"Why had you not told me of your feeling unwell on the night of the ball?"

"Because I thought you looked so tired. It was only the great heat of the ball-room, and the scent of the flowers—it was nothing, my own beloved."

"Quite sure—you do not hide anything from me, Lucienne?"

"No, no, Jean; there is nothing but the cackling of idle tongues, the fancies of ignorant minds."

"Ah! but the Priest's attitude was very serious—he warned me over and over again, and his brow was dark as he told me to take care."

"Idle gossip," retorted Lucienne. "Do you doubt me, Jean?" She nestled close to him, putting her two arms round his neck. "Do you think me capable of ever . . ."

"No, not you! but I fear others."

"You are all to me—and best of all—you are my lover." Her head was on his shoulder, and her eyes

uplifted to his held him captive. He knew well that no other man would ever be anything to her. He held her in his arms, and covered her lips with kisses, long kisses from which passionate words escaped.

Lucienne suddenly stood up, brushing her hair behind her ears.

"Let me go—I want to know what all these rumours are."

"Where are you going?" Jean got up and put his arms round her. He had forgotten all his fears and suspicions in that embrace. He only wished to keep this lovely body in his arms, and to give himself up to the intoxication of her love.

"I am going to the Presbytery. He will tell me what he meant by warning you." She tried to free herself from his caress.

"No—go to-morrow," he whispered softly, "I want you——"

"No, no; I must know at once what it is—let me go." As he whispered a few words in her ear, she drew closer to him and murmured, "Yes—I will come back very soon."

"It is so late, Lucienne."

"Hardly nine;" and picking up a lace scarf she threw it over her head, opened the door, and went out into the dark night.

The weather had changed since supper, and although the fine rain could not be seen, one could hear it dripping on the leaves, and she felt the cool moisture on her forehead. The swallows were flying low, and a rumble of thunder was audible in the distance. There was a poignant sadness in the atmosphere which enveloped Lucienne, and although she felt on her lips the burning kisses of her husband, still she had a pang at her heart, for it was the first time in her life that she lied to him; and her falsehood grieved her. She felt that some strange element had come into their lives, and that from this day everything would be changed.

She rang at the door of the Presbytery; the sound of wooden shoes came nearer.

"Ah! it is you, Madame Darlot."

"Is Monsieur le Curé at home?"

"Yes, he is; I hope nothing has happened?" and the old woman went up the stairs followed by Madame Darlot. At the end of the passage the old mother knocked at the door and opened it.

"It is Madame Darlot who wishes to see you."

"Forgive me, Monsieur le Curé." Lucienne had followed, and stood in the doorway, anxious to be admitted at once.

"Come in, Madame. Can I do anything for you?" The Priest was standing in the middle of the little room. He pointed to a chair; the door was closed, and they were alone.

"I could not wait until to-morrow; excuse my disturbing you."

"Pray sit down."

She sat down, and the Abbé Martin having seated himself at his writing-desk, which was littered with books and papers, took up the paper-knife and twisted it in his fingers to hide his awkwardness.

"You told my husband about some strange gossip concerning me."

"Oh! one must not attach too much importance to such tittle-tattle. Peasants are loquacious—prejudiced; they often form judgments on the merest trifles."

"But what are these rumours—and why should they form any judgments on what they know nothing about?" she eagerly inquired.

"Ah, you cannot change human nature. Besides, I only told your husband these things in his interest, not because I believed in such nonsense."

"I have come to ask you the truth, because I wish to know it." The firm tone in which Lucienne spoke seemed to act like a lash on the Curé; he leaned back in his chair.

"They say that you have secret appointments with Monsieur de Laya." Lucienne made a movement. "Mind you, I tell you what they say—you asked me."

"And then?" went on Lucienne.

"They even say that you have been seen roaming on Monsieur de Laya's property."

"Impossible! You know as well as I do that these stories are ridiculous."

"Yes, they are such to us; but they are firmly believed in by those who invent them, or pass them on."

"But how do these tales get about? Some one must start them," asked Lucienne.

"Bah! it is very simple; a footman saw you leave the historical apartments, a chambermaid saw Monsieur le Laya leave the same place soon after you. Old Louvier's nephew said he saw you leave the Castle with a man on the night of the ball—*voilà!* Quite sufficient to ruin a woman's reputation."

She had thrown back her lace scarf, and her fair head lighted up the dimly-lit room. In coming to see the Curé she had forgotten to change her garment for a more fitting formal costume, and her loose tea-gown, open at the neck and arms, revealed the beauty of her skin, which breathed life, youth and love. The young Priest felt the feminine magnetism all around him; her eyes, her voice made him feel weak, and he gave himself up gladly to the influence of this woman, to the sweet intimacy which had sprung up between them from the fact of her coming to appeal to him. The scene was so full of suggestive piquancy that he forgot his ecclesiastic shyness and dropped into a more familiar manner, whilst the tone of his conversation became more confidential.

"Yes," said Lucienne, lowering her voice, "the servant may be quite right, and Louvier's nephew may not be wrong; still, it is not quite as they think." The events of the ball came back to her memory. "Monsieur le Curé, I have lied to my husband for the first time in my life—I must tell you exactly what happened," and she related all that had occurred on the night of the ball, and her meeting with the Dowager. Then she told him how she had been trapped by Roland de Laya—or by Madame de Cardaillan—perhaps by both—into the Château, and

how Madame de Cardaillan had come into the room and denied having ever asked her to come.

Lucienne, carried away by her narrative, did not notice the dusky colour which flamed into the Priest's face as she related the scenes that had taken place in the Diane room. He listened with downcast eyes, playing with his paper-knife, whilst from time to time a sceptical smile flitted over his thick lips.

"You see now for yourself that I could not tell my husband—he would have suffered for my sake—and I have tried to spare him as much as I could."

"Yes—you were right."

"Still, my visits to Limeray are a complete fabrication; and the cause for my being seen coming out of the historical apartments is not what the villagers think. *You* could use your influence over them to dispel this calumny, M. le Curé."

"Ah! Madame, do you believe I have any influence over these people?" The Priest was beating a tattoo on the table with his paper-knife. He shook his head despondently. "All I can do is not to agree with them—but there my influence ends. I cannot mix myself up in their gossip; they would soon begin to wonder why I defended you. You do not know these people."

"Then, you see no means of ever stopping these rumours?"

"No—unless you will altogether give up going to the Château; but then, what do they think about it all up there?"

"I do not know."

"What is that woman's motive—and Monsieur de Laya's—in trapping you into that plan? I cannot understand it. He is her lover, every one in the country knows that; but why revenge herself? It is some heinous trick of a jealous woman, no doubt," and the Abbé Martin threw the paper-knife down amongst the papers on the desk.

"Could you speak to the Dowager? They would be sure to listen to you?"

"I—speak to the old Marquise? She would very

much wonder how I knew all this ; if not through you—how could I know all the incidents. No, no ; those kind of people are too cynical to care, and the peasants too obstinate to believe anything but what suits them."

"Then what can one do ? It is impossible to let such untruths go about the place without at least doing one's best to contradict them."

"I can only suggest your leaving the place."

"Why should we act like cowards and give the right to these people to think of us as culpable ? Besides, this is my home ; why should we run away ?" and she looked up into his clouded face.

"I only say this in your interest, Madame ; but maybe this silly gossip will die out of itself."

"That is not a satisfactory answer when a human being's reputation is at stake, Monsieur le Curé. Do you not see your way to convincing your parishioners of the truth ?"

"Oh, Madame!—the truth, the truth ; they do not care much about that ; they prefer their gossip to everything ; and, after all, they themselves do not attach much importance to what is said ; next week they will have some other story to drive away this one."

"Meanwhile, a human being lives under a cloud—a calumny, which ought to be dispelled."

"Madame, we are here to receive confessions, not to force avowals from our parishioners, nor to act as inquisitors." In an instant the man had vanished and the Priest had reappeared, with all his dogmatic speeches and chilly reasoning. "Our position is very delicate—it will soon become intolerable ; we must limit ourselves to what the ecclesiastical ministry binds us to."

"It is you yourselves who make your positions impossible," exclaimed Lucienne, as she replaced her lace scarf on her head. "You are too conscious of your cassock, and you attach too much importance to your ecclesiastical ministry and to what it binds you to, or releases you from."



"How rightly you judge, Madame; this cursed cassock prevents us from being natural, it impedes the movements of our limbs as much as it stops the flight of our souls. We are down-trodden and paralyzed. A friend of mine, relegated to a small parish, died of grief the other day. The man was of a jovial temperament, and for that reason they sent him to an out-of-the-way place. He died of boredom. This place is not so bad—and I shall not die of grief; but I must remain in a state of mental inertia, in order that I may be tolerated by these people."

"Do you think they would not love you if you were to treat them as man to man?"

"Oh! do not make any mistake about them—I know our peasants. They are either atheists, or ignorantly superstitious—sometimes both at once—but they do not want us to treat them as man to man. We are paid to christen, to marry, and to bury them; to tell them religious legends which we only half believe; and there ends our mission."

He bowed his head. He would have loved to launch out in one of his soliloquies about Church reforms, and transplant the conversation from a personal topic to general ideas; but Lucienne rose to go. Her figure seemed taller than usual in this small room, sparsely furnished, and dimly lighted. Books of all kinds were about—on shelves, on chairs, piled on the floor: yellow-backed novels, educational booklets, old parchments in folios. It gave the onlooker the impression that the owner of this room was a great reader, which was untrue, for although the Abbé Martin was fond of reading, he preferred light literature to the more solid kind. Nothing about the room indicated the age of the owner. The rooms of Priests give no clue to their *état*; nor do they reveal the tastes or occupation of their occupants. Lucienne looked round the room, perhaps because she felt suddenly ill at ease. There was no clock anywhere to tell her what time it was. On the small mantelpiece stood a tiny statuette of Pope Leo XIII., and the little figure, smiling at her with irony, made her shiver. She had

never come into close contact with religion, although she knew it had reigned for centuries over souls, and turned the scales of many political and social events.

She felt a pang at her heart at seeing this young man in front of her—abandoned, useless ; and no doubt one of thousands in whom a contempt of life and of human efforts have been inculcated. He stood before her a mental wreck, swayed to and fro by varied circumstances ; tossed from the heights of early ambitions down to the depths of bitter failure—a village Prometheus minus the fire. She had never been instructed in religion, and never had felt curious to inquire into the spiritual world ; but she was now suddenly thrown into close contact, not with faith, but with destructive doubt. As she looked at his stooping shoulders, at his emotional features, and noticed the nervous twitching of the fingers which held the back of his chair, her heart was filled with an overpowering pity for this poor creature astray in life, who possessed no longer the sacred fire of the ancient martyrs ; and in whom the Seminary discipline had crushed out all masculine strength and courage, as well as all mental independence. She had come to him that night as one human being would go to another for help, and she was conscious of a tacit opposition in him ; and in the dejected creature before her, she believed she saw the decadence of the Church. She no longer felt that she was there to ask his help, but, on the contrary, to try to help him, to endeavour to vivify his dead heart, to awaken his inert soul, and to set free his mind which lay crushed under the weight of dogmatic sophism. She longed to take him by the hand and lead him out of this chilly den into the daylight of life, and to say to him, "Be a man ;—take all that life has to give you—be happy, and give happiness ; give help, and allow yourself to be nourished by nature." Her heart was so full of commiseration for him that her lips betrayed her feelings, and before she could realize what she was doing, she had said—

"I pity you."

"You are right, madame ; but such is life——" and he shrugged his shoulders despondently.

"No, it is not life—it is death. You seem to accept as inevitable the complexities that you yourself create in life ; but life is not that ; life means action, power to do good."

"Ah ! Madame, we priests are incapable of coping with life ; we are of no use outside our Churches ; and what we do learn from life is not always the best side of it. We are men, after all, but we are not manly ;—that is why, when a priest falls, he falls lower than an ordinary man. His fall is irremediable, and the experience which he might reap from his errors is useless to him in his degradation, for he has passions without freedom, and has not sufficient mental power to learn useful lessons from them."

"Is there nothing to be done to improve your condition ?"

"Ah ! what can one do ? We are taught nothing in the Seminary, and a man, when he has arrived at my age—forty—is incapable of beginning any kind of work."

"But you are in the prime of life—I thought you were much younger." She put out her hand, and it lay for some seconds in his cold, inert palm, while he looked at her askance with his head on one side.

"We are only children under the appearance of men," he said, dropping her hand. "You had better go home by the garden door—it is nearer to the Farm."

They passed out into the garden, and were soon at the gate. The rain was now falling heavily.

"What rain ! you will be drenched by the time you reach home, Madame."

"Never mind." And the young woman's figure disappeared in the dark night. He went back slowly to his room, and stood a few minutes, breathing the sweet perfume which the young woman had left behind her. He felt her presence still around him ; he heard her soft, deep tones ; and saw her lovely form and golden hair. The incident of the ball haunted him painfully. He conjured up the vision

of Lucienne in Gaston's arms, and a hot flush mounted to his face. He tried to collect his thoughts and to think of what she had come to ask him, but ever the image of the Comte pressing her lovely body in his arms tormented his feverish brain. He quite understood the Comte's passion for her ; and he pictured to himself what that woman's kiss would be. The room was close, there was no air, and the little lamp flickered dimly. He opened the window, pushed back the shutters, and looked out into the dark night, listening to the monotonous splashing of the rain on the leaves.

He leaned against the open window and stared fixedly into the damp obscurity without. His long body was without energy, his face without expression, under the influence of moral depression. He knew that he had displeased Lucienne, and that she would be disappointed at his not taking up the cudgels for her. But she would not understand that he could not remain one day in Crespy were he to infringe his rule of maintaining a systematic reserve towards his parishioners. It was already very difficult to keep his position and to manoeuvre adroitly between his bishop and his flock ; but how much worse would it be if he mixed himself up in their private affairs and opinions ! It was hard enough to keep body and soul together when one had no private means, and it was all very well being chivalrous ; but, on thirty-four pounds a year, chivalry lost a good deal of its attractiveness. Rich people could afford to take the part of the weak against the strong ; but he had no power ; besides, it would mean the loss of bread and butter for him, and who knew even how long this miserable beggar's pittance, which the State gives to her Priests, would last ? Once a priest, always a priest—not that he himself attached much importance to religious vows, but his spirit, like those of many of his colleagues, was trained to submission, and could never now free itself, and face the world in an open fight. The Seminary treadmill had made him what he was : a soul without freedom, a heart without a home, a brain without any direction.

Religious discipline had ground his individuality to nought, until final dissolution should reduce his body to ashes ; but meanwhile he was condemned to a routine which never developed either his cerebral faculties, nor his muscular powers. He was dissatisfied with life and his surroundings, unbelieving in the next world, feeling irritable towards those whom nature had given him for companions, but whom his education had taught him to despise ; incapable of resigning himself to his dreary fate, and utterly unfitted for any life struggle. "Ah! it is better to be with the dead than amongst the living," he had once remarked to a woman who had escaped being shut up in a graveyard all night. He felt he would never know anything else but this deadly solitude—whether it was in Crespy or in any other place—this same ecclesiastical routine, and this unsatisfied craving for love. He had no moral courage to throw tradition to the winds and start a new life ; and he only knew the side of passion that lowers a man and not that which ennobles him. He had not within his heart the mediæval hatred and dread for women, which is but another form of desire ; no, he loved the feminine influence around him, and Lucienne's presence, more than that of any other woman, went to his head like wine. After all, he was only a peasant, with a healthy appetite for the good things of this world ; and solitude and religious drill had turned him into a morbid cynic.

He gazed out into the damp night and felt neither the wet nor the cold on his face. He was haunted by the vision of Lucienne, the sound of her voice, the look of her warm flesh held him entranced, whilst a bitter disgust of life filled his heart. A sob moved his breast, rose to his throat, and escaped from his parted lips, as big tears rolled out of his eyes, down his pale cheeks, and dropped on his shabby cassock.

## CHAPTER XIII

JEAN did not question Lucienne any more about Monsieur de Laya, and he deliberately shunned the priest who had been the first to give him the cruellest pain which one man can inflict upon another. He would often upbraid his wife for her indifference towards the shortcomings of society—shortcomings which wounded his pride as a man, and irritated his artistic delicacy of feeling, whilst his eyes would flash angry looks at her when she spoke pitifully of the poor creature in whom ecclesiastical discipline had crushed heart, brain, and all independence of character.

Since the arrival at Crespy of the Savignys and the Laumels, Lucienne had noticed a change in her husband's manner. Their love for one another had hitherto realized all their hopes and longings; but now, circumstances were developing passions in Jean which their former simple life had left dormant in his heart. The artist in him had triumphed over the man during eight years of happiness; but the complexities of social life were gradually altering the attitude of this couple towards each other, as Jean's jealousy was aroused at the idea of his wife's contact with men who openly admired her beauty, and whose society he dreaded for her. His student friends, it is true, had treated her familiarly; had often even coarsely joked before her, when they used to meet together in one of the small restaurants of the Latin Quarter; but Jean knew that if any of them had tried to play havoc with his happiness, he would have seized the aggressor by the neck and thrown him out of doors. He knew how to deal with them, and his confidence in his domestic bliss lay chiefly in his knowledge of his surroundings.

He was primitive in his notion of happiness, direct in the execution of what he wished; and although his love for his wife was softened by fondness, still he loved in a primitive fashion—by right of conquest. She was all to him, because he had made her his. She

was as much his friend as his mistress, and shared his aspirations and longings as keenly as she responded to his passionate love. But here, in this new *milieu*, he felt that his happiness was built upon a foundation no more stable than the sands of the seas; he realized that his wife's beauty was not solely his own to enjoy, and that his power over her might one day be destroyed by an unknown force, against which he was unprepared and defenceless.

It was not that he loved her less for the admiration she excited amongst the men whom she met at the Château, but his love unconsciously acquired a fierceness of passion which at times became almost cruel. He found a malign enjoyment in making her suffer for the tortures he endured. He did not openly confess his jealousy; but a sullen rage rankled in his heart against her for smiling on those men who looked at her with impertinent fervour. He loved her as a man does who fears to lose what he possesses; his kisses left wounds upon her lips; her heart nearly stopped as he crushed her body against his breast, and his caresses passed from the tender appeal of the child who coaxes until he obtains his wish, to the fierce rage of the feline beast who tears to bits the victim of his covetousness. He had not always loved her as selfishly as now. His love had been a royal feast at which he had invited her to sit beside him. What rapture it had been to awaken in her the passion that was in his heart! To watch the flame light up in her eyes and the sensual delight in her slightly-parted lips, had thrilled him with unselfish pride; and his love had daily increased, fed by the reciprocity which it met with on the part of the woman whom he loved. But his passion for her had recently lost the halo of fondness which ennobled its ardour; and when her features revealed the inner pain which gnawed at her heart, his face lighted up with proud joy at being able to impress her so deeply.

She knew him well enough to be sure that, although he never mentioned Monsieur de Laya's name, the

Curé's warning had yet sunk deep into his heart, and that the sudden change in the attitude of the Savignys towards them had aroused suspicions in his mind which would be as difficult to banish as they were impossible to express. She wondered whether he had heard any more about the scene in the Diane room, and watched daily the expression on Jean's features when he came home from his painting excursions. She knew that Madame de Cardaillan had left Crespy for her property in Lorraine, and that Monsieur de Laya had returned to Touraine. Her informant had been the Mayoress, who, having put two and two together, had come to the conclusion that something was wrong, and that Lucienne had been excluded from the gay world of the Château. This did not in the least affect her relations with Madame Darlot ; for, strangely enough, whether from indifference or scepticism, the peasant carries the tenet of *laisser-faire* and *laisser-aller* to an extent which far surpasses even the cynicism of a Louis XV. ; and, from the Mayor down to the poorest labourer in Crespy, everybody gossiped about Lucienne, judged her motives, condemned her actions—even discussed her past, of which they were ignorant, and anticipated her future, which they could not know either. But this did not prevent them, an hour later, from greeting her genially on the road, and speaking familiarly to her of all that concerned them, or even, in an emergency, from showing their sympathy to the woman they had maligned but an instant before, and would do again next day. Self-interest keeps human beings linked to one another. Tongues may wag, but life is earnest, and who knows what the morrow may bring? The peasant sneers at human frailties, exaggerates even the scandalous reports which are spread from field to cottage ; but his opinion of his fellow-creatures never directs his conduct of life, which is invariably ruled by worldly wisdom and by the all-powerful agent in all human affairs—self-interest.

Since her fruitless appeal to the Curé, Lucienne had learnt to school her impulsiveness, and she found it



wiser for Jean's happiness never to mention any of the inhabitants of Crespy-sur-Roc, for fear of saying more than she wished to. She had never known what it was to be reserved with Jean, and it was only when his forlorn look and passionate outbursts of love aroused her anxiety for his peace and for their future happiness, that she had resolved to train herself to dissimulate her feelings, and to appear light-hearted and indifferent. Whenever he mentioned the Comtesse Hélène, or the young Marquise de Savigny, accusing them of taking her up as capriciously as they had dropped her, she would come round, and whisper softly, "Never mind, my darling, we are better without them." Her feminine influence would steal over his senses, effacing for a short time all the bitterness in his heart, and he would give himself up to the passion with which she inspired him, and which power she was aware of possessing over him. He suffered—that was the cruellest part of it all; and to spare him one minute's vexation, to dispel the cloud which darkened his brow, she felt herself capable of attempting anything, and of facing the hardest task. She believed in life, in its beauty and truth; and in her well-balanced mind, sorrow and injustice were merely the accompanying shadows which increased or decreased as the sun rose from, or declined towards, the horizon.

She had been warned in time, and the Priest's advice, notwithstanding his cowardly refusal to help her, was not to be disregarded. All would perhaps be for the best, after all; the Marquis de Savigny had not reiterated his invitation to Jean to finish the picture, and the sketch stood on an easel in the Diane Room—the poplar trees just sketched in and the river faintly outlined. The guests, they heard, were leaving one by one, and very soon Jean and she would resume their solitary lives which were so full of inner joys.

Only one man could silence the village gossips which had disturbed Jean's peace of mind; and, after spending sleepless hours watching the troubled

expression on her husband's face, Lucienne determined to appeal to Monsieur de Laya's sense of justice, and ask him to deny that he had ever received a letter from her appointing a *rendezvous* in the Diane Room. Not for her own sake would she go—but for Jean. Her instinct told her that the poison of suspicion was destroying his trust in her, and that very soon their happiness would be ruined. However cruel and humiliating it was, she would face this trial for his sake. Anything was preferable to this anguish he was suffering.

Roland de Laya was standing one afternoon in front of a large table littered with proofs, manuscripts and books, when the door of the library was opened to admit Madame Darlot. He put down the papers he held in his hand, and a malicious smile parted his lips as he muttered, "At last!" Neither spoke, until the servant had closed the door. Then Laya came close to her.

"You have come at last, Madame. I told you three weeks ago that it had to be." He bowed to her like a man who can afford to be humble, knowing the victory to be his.

"I have come, Monsieur"—she leaned against the table, laying her hand on a book—"to ask a favour."

"A favour—from me?" He laid his hand on hers. "You have only to command me." Her hand trembled, and she drew it away.

"You are mistaken, I do not command—I beg of you to tell the truth; for you know that I never wrote that letter fixing an appointment at the Château."

"Ha! ha! Madame." He dropped her hand. "*Encore*—is that old story troubling you?"

"It does not trouble me, for I know the truth, so do you; but—my husband might believe in the calumny—appearances are against me, and his happiness is jeopardized; as a man, you must understand this."

"Ah! Madame, calumny is a nasty word—for, if calumny there is, then my vanity must inevitably be wounded."

"It is not a question of vanity, Monsieur, but of truth—of honour." She looked up into his face unblushingly.

"How exquisitely daring she is," he thought. "It is rather too late to think of that now, Madame," he said aloud. "You ought to have thought of the consequences before you conferred upon me the honour of meeting you that day." At a movement of Lucienne, he exclaimed, "Besides which, your husband was an *imbécile* to leave you alone for one day even."

"Ah, Monsieur, why do you persist in this comedy? Is not Madame de Cardaillan's love sufficient for you? She loves you—and I do not."

"H'm! jealous, no doubt," thought Roland, who looked with critical appreciation at the indignation flashing in her eyes. "No, Madame, Marie and I are only friends now; she has accepted the position, *pauvre* Marie. The coast is clear; a woman of your beauty cannot admit of any rival—I quite understand." His eyes wandered from her neck and shoulders down to her waist.

"I never wrote that note—you know it." She spoke hurriedly and leaned against the table, putting her two hands behind her on the table.

"I received a letter from you fixing a *rendezvous* to I which went." He pulled his moustache, and looked at her from under his half-closed eyelids.

"No, no, it is not possible! You know it is not the truth." She pressed her hands upon her breast.

"There is only one truth, Madame—that you are beautiful—and that you are alone here with me." His arms were opened to receive her, she already felt his breath upon her neck.

"I cannot believe you capable of ruining an honest man's happiness." Laya drew himself up, and a flash of anger crossed his dark eyes.

"Ha! ha! ha!" he laughed sardonically. "Your husband will appreciate your beauty the more when other men desire to possess you."

"Then, did you believe I had come to——?"

"Yes, to renew our interrupted conversation in the Diane room, Madame." The mad wish to insult this woman took hold of Laya; if she had not come with the intention he imputed to her, what on earth did she expect him to do for her?

"Ah! it is cruel and ungenerous of you," she exclaimed, hiding her face in her hands.

"It is a compliment I am paying you, Madame," he sniggered. "If you did not belong to me on that day, it was no doubt because the psychological moment had not yet come."

"Why do you judge me so wrongly?" she murmured.

"Allow me, Madame, I would not insult you by believing you capable of failing in your mission as a woman."

"Which is——?" and removing her hands from her face she looked into his eyes. What she saw there revealed to her what the mission of a woman was, especially of a beautiful woman, in the mind of this man who never had opened his arms to a woman in vain, and who considered feminine reticence as an offence to his masculine pride.

"But when a woman has never meant to attract the attentions of a man, is she bound to fulfil what you call her mission?"

"The woman devoid of passion is unnatural," cuttingly answered Roland.

Their eyes met like the blades of two swords, and in that metallic shock the two combatants measured their strength. She realized the unfairness of the fight with this adversary; and he saw that he had failed, and that revenge was his last stroke. As long as he believed in winning this woman, he had been prepared to fight; the game suited his adventurous temperament; and even when he believed himself for ever cured of sexual passion, this woman had attracted him, by her absence of coquetry and her fascination, which created an atmosphere around her. He had laughed at her demure game in the Diane Room. That was the natural instinct in women

which incited them to run, hide, cajole and scratch, whenever the male was playing his part of hunter. As long as the game was enticing, why complain of its duration? Especially when the end was sure to be to his satisfaction. His vanity had been wounded, and the woman, for whom he could have mastered his passion until the time of her surrender had struck, became in one instant the sexual enemy, who vindicates the right to attract and repulse. She had defrauded him of what, as a man, he believed to be his due of the woman's beauty and charm which merely exist for man's pleasure; and when once he had deigned to notice her, she was his by right. But a man like Monsieur de Laya never forgave an insult; and he was determined not to suffer at the hands of a woman, nor to allow her to place him in a ridiculous position without making her pay for it cruelly. As the victim of a plot she was not interesting any longer, and belonged to that class of honest women which includes a man's mother; sometimes the mother of his children; but which includes also the women who, from the very fact of their virtue, are for ever spoiling the sport of love.

After the first chill of disappointment, a rush of hot blood surged to his brain, colouring his sallow complexion, and anger rose in his heart against this woman who had taken up his time, and pleaded in the name of her husband's peace of mind.

"And what will you answer to those who credit this absurd tale?" inquired Lucienne.

"Absurd is—rather hard, Madame—on me."

"Either you never received the letter, or you did—in this last case, who wrote it?"

"Ha! ha!" Laya laughed in his moustache as the vision of Marie de Cardaillan crossed his mind. If it was she who had concocted this cabal, she was after all only playing her part in the world's comedy; and a discarded mistress revenging herself of her lover's desertion, was more flattering to his vanity than an outraged woman who only appealed to a man's honour. Lucienne was nothing more than a

*bourgeoise* who loved her husband ; and his logic of life was annoyed at Nature's wastefulness in creating such beauty for the sole enjoyment of—a Darlot. If it was Marie's work, she had revenged herself on Lucienne, as only a woman of her type will revenge herself when a man she loves has made her feel that she is growing old. Well, what a woman had willed, he would not undo—he at least would not give her the satisfaction of thinking that he had failed in his amorous exploits. A man like him could face scandal, but not derision, he could be proclaimed unscrupulous and desperate, but could never be made to appear a fool.

He considered Lucienne's question puerile.

"Even if I knew the author of the letter, what would you have me do?"

"You could redress a wrong."

"Wrongs are rarely redressed. The world believes in what it chooses to believe, and I never undertake thankless tasks."

"Then my husband's suspicions?"

"The unimpeachable woman needs no man's help ; she finds her reward in the knowledge of her own impeccability," replied Roland, looking at Lucienne with an ironical smile on his lips.

"Must a cloud for ever hang over our happiness?"

"Ah, Madame, you do poor honour to your husband's powers of discrimination," interrupted Roland, making a movement towards the door. He thought the interview had lasted long enough ; turning to her, he said : "Allow me, Madame, to give you a word of advice : never allow your husband to believe that he possesses you completely ; for, the man who ceases to fear for the safety of his happiness is no longer a lover ; but on no account let a man who covets your beauty think that you will never belong to him, because the lover will turn against you, and you may miss the epilogue of passion—even of unrequited passion—friendship."

It was war between them, and the sword of each combatant was already inflicting wounds upon the other.

"Your words are cruel, but I laugh your threat to scorn," Lucienne answered, going towards the door.

"No, Madame, they are not cruel, but logical."

"Life as you represent it is unnatural."

"Bah! Life is made up of contradictions; that is why we need an implacable logic to make all things adjust themselves and fit together."

"Is there nothing real in life for you, except cynicism and cruelty?"

He held the handle of the door in one hand. "It is because life is so intensely real that I object to up-setting anything. In a game of chess, we only move our men in order to gain a better position, not to lose the one we have."

A blush rose to her face. He opened the door wide for her to pass out. She paused.

"You came by the front gate, Madame?"

"Yes——" He noticed a slight hesitation in her manner.

"You could return by the kitchen-garden door." They walked down the steps. "No one will see you."

A profound *ennui* filled his soul when he came back to the vestibule and entered the drawing-room, which was at the right hand of the hall, extending the whole length of the building. He detested useless emotions and ill-employed hours. Lucienne had left some of her personality in this desolate place, and the feeling of something missed rose up before him, bringing back memories of past years, and sensations gone for ever.

The drawing-room was long and had four windows, two of which opened on to the terrace. Since the departure of his wife and her mother, Roland rarely entered this room. The large chintz-covered easy-chairs stood at each side of the marble chimney piece; the round Empire tables were placed at different points of the long room, their brass handles shining brightly in the sun's rays which came through the windows. Two Louis XVI. glass cases, containing Sèvres knick-knacks, old snuff-boxes, and several old

fans, painted by Boucher, stood against the grey-panelled walls. There were no books, no fancy work, and the clock had stopped several weeks ago.

Roland de Laya loved this corner of Touraine, and whenever he had a few weeks, or even a few days to spare, he came down, sometimes without his valet, to shut himself up in his library, wander in the old grounds, and shun every one he knew in the neighbourhood. His childhood came back to his memory as he looked out of one of the French windows, at the long avenue in front of the Château, bordered by high poplar trees. How often had he cantered on his pony up and down there, by his father's side. His mother standing on the terrace, had watched his first pony rides. He saw her now in his mind's eye—that beloved mother whom he had lost so young. He heard her plaintive voice, saw her pale blue eyes, which always smiled at him, even when her lips tried to word some reproof. He had been a turbulent and domineering child, but at a sign from his mother he would become meek and loving. For her he always had tender kisses, of which no one else suspected him; for her he possessed a delicacy of touch, which was more like a girl's than a boisterous boy's. Mother and son worshipped one another, and when she felt her end drawing near, she smiled a last smile of pride on her death-bed as she watched his graceful and attractive presence, and noted the lofty intellect which lighted up his eyes and brow. She left him alone in the world, but she believed in his great heart and his powerful mind; and she died broken-hearted at leaving him, but confident that his life would be a brilliant and an honourable one. Would Roland have fallen a prey to Marie de Cardaillan had his mother been alive? Left alone at twenty-two years of age, rich and ambitious, he had been flattered by the attentions of a woman who, although many years his senior, was known as one of the most captivating women of his set, and certainly one of the most unprincipled. He was subjugated by her brilliant wit and voluptuous beauty, and for a few years she gave him the illusion



of happiness. He had never thought of the difference of age there was between them, and had she been free he would no doubt have married her, for she held him enthralled, body and soul. At the same time as she had initiated him into the science of gallantry, in which she was efficient, she had also developed his power of discernment which one day would be used by him at her own expense. But she ignored the flights of intellect which now and then lent to his soul a considerable elevation, and often made his heart sink within his breast as he contemplated the failure of his life. She had only preyed on his pride and vanity, to which he had but too much sacrificed the best of himself, until he had erected worldly success into a code of honour. It was his logic, and life had to be lived from some consistent point of view!

Since his rupture with Marie he had to some extent reconquered himself. For some years now he had ceased to love the woman whose wrinkles he had counted. Her wit was old-fashioned; and even her perversity had a stale flavour of the court of Napoleon III., and she judged life and men with a mind which could not evolve any more. In fact, there was not one point upon which they could meet, and she was a perpetual obstacle to his ideal of life.

A clock struck four. It was in the next room—his mother's boudoir, which he had kept exactly as it was during her life-time, to the great irritation of his wife. He regularly wound up the clock every fifteen days, since his mother's death; and when he was away he paid the farmer's wife expressly for that purpose. How many thousands of hours had it struck, when he and his mother had been alone in her boudoir, he reading aloud, perhaps, she working at some fancy work! When he was late for his lesson, and burst into the room with his little whip in his hand, she would point towards the timepiece with her white hand, and without a word he would fly into her arms, and coax and murmur into her ear sweet words which came pouring forth from his overflowing heart.

Many scenes of his childhood and youth rose to his mind—voices long silent spoke to him again, and he heard the soft rustle of his mother's skirts as the flutter of a bird's wings soaring up to the heavens. He became a prey to the memories of a past which had been intensely full of life, and he felt in his heart a deeper and bitter regret for what might have been, for the things he had lost and missed. A lassitude crept over his limbs and numbed his senses, and with closed eyes he let his mind wander aimlessly in a world of fantasy.

When he re-opened his wearied eyelids he did not immediately recognize his familiar surroundings, and it was only after a few moments that he became aware of the figure of a man hastening up the avenue towards the house. Who could it be? The man was too far off to be recognized, but his gait was that of a man bent on some urgent errand. Roland was still amongst the ghosts evoked by the strike of the old clock, and he took but little interest in this man who was coming towards the house. Suddenly the man looked up at the Louis XIII. Château, stood still for a few seconds and went on, hurrying his steps, fists clenched, and brow bent.

Roland passed his hand over his forehead. He, one by one, chased away the visions of the past: the doors turned on their old hinges; the voices vanished in the atmosphere; the rustling skirt stopped its flutter, and the dreamer dragged himself back to reality—to his present self; back to the logic of his existence, and to the codes of honour dictated by vanity; back to the manly pride which a little while ago had received a mortal offence.

He heard the footsteps on the gravel. The flower-bed which stood in front of the terrace hid the man from him for a few moments, then he came into sight again. He was coming up the steps. A smile parted Roland's lips.

"Already." He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, if he wishes it—let it be." He heard the scraping of boots at the entrance of the vestibule. "Poor devil!"

He turned towards the door; Jean Darlot stood on the threshold.

Roland advanced a few steps towards Jean.

"You have come to attack me, Monsieur; I am alone."

Darlot had come to know the truth about Laya's relations with Lucienne, with the determination to deal with that man as one does with a thief who breaks into the house; but he had not come to take the life of a defenceless man who gave himself up to him. He was no coward, and he drew back before Monsieur de Laya, who was approaching him with an easy and composed manner.

"I cannot attribute your visit to any other motive, not being in the habit of having visits from people I do not know; and as I am not inclined to receive insults from any one, allow me to take the first steps."

Jean sprang forward under the burning insult.

"My wife . . . !" He spoke hoarsely, the blood rushing to the cheek that Laya had struck with his hand.

"You are the offended one, Monsieur. I am quite at your disposal, choose your arms."

"What matters about arms—my wife! Is she here?" His voice was uncontrolled.

"She was—but has left," replied Roland reluctantly; he did not see that he had any explanations to give this infuriated creature. He was ready to offer the satisfaction that a man of the world gives to another, and that was sufficient.

"Why did she come?" said Jean.

"Ah! why!" slowly drawled out Roland, with a shrug of the shoulder.

"Speak the truth! What matters now, when all is lost—you inveigled her!" Jean was losing ground; the mad power which had driven him here was breaking up, and he felt helpless before this well-trained man of the world who had at once taken the upper hand, and turned the tables against his aggressor.

"You made her come here—speak out!" roared Darlot, coming close to Roland, with clenched fists.

"I do not intend to defend myself—think whatever you wish," coldly replied Laya.

"She is here—hiding!" he shrieked into Roland's face; the latter drew himself up.

"I give you my word of honour that she is *not* here. Don't make a fool of yourself, and let us end this. Scenes of this kind easily turn to burlesque;—let us settle it as a business transaction. You have the choice of arms—choose your witnesses, they will meet mine this day—and there it ends. You have nothing to complain of."

"You have ruined my life—and you speak of business transactions. Is that the way you settle things in your world?" His sense of shame made his blood beat against his temples; his words were spoken in a rough hoarse tone which made Roland wince.

"We are not two navvies fighting in the dockyard—we are men living in an organized society, and must submit to certain rules of good manners."

"I have asked a question," roughly said Jean, "and on the answer to that question hangs my honour."

"And I have answered that question," replied Roland, looking into the artist's face with the far-away glance of a man who has communed with the phantoms of his dreams. "If this man only knew how he had been spared," thought Roland, "and how the answer to his question might have been a cruel one! But let him have the benefit of the doubt, poor devil! If his wife has written the letter—after all, whoever knows a woman—well, let him remain ignorant of it."

"Your wife is not here; and fate will decide between us to-morrow, if you like. Excuse me for hurrying this affair, but I am due in Paris in two or three days."

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## CHAPTER XIV

It was not for this that Jean had sought Monsieur de Laya. After having been told by old Louvier that

he had seen Lucienne enter Limeray some time before, he had started on her track like the hound after the fox ; to kill the man—or both, if it was necessary. In his blind passion he had felt himself capable of accomplishing the impossible. The laws which govern the universe existed no longer for the man who was going towards the realization of his brutal instincts.

But, on finding himself once more alone on the high road, he stood a defenceless man, his will power broken by an unknown force which had intervened and arranged events as they had to be, not as he wished them to be ; and he had been made to realize that well-ordained society did not admit of such uncouth intruders as he. He smarted yet under the lash of the insult ; whilst the hand of Laya across his face had for ever cut the bonds which united him to Lucienne. He heard still the sneer of contempt which had escaped Laya's lips, and saw the flash of triumph in the eyes of the man who had robbed him of his revenge by remaining self-possessed and master of the situation. The offence stung his vanity too sharply for him to be able quite to overlook Lucienne's share in it ; and not only did he blame her for wrecking his happiness, but he mentally accused her also of being an accomplice in the outrage inflicted on him by her lover. What a fool he had been to believe he could keep the love of a woman of her stamp ! She had instincts in her which had been handed down to her by her mixed parentage, and everything that hitherto had charmed him in her—her innate refinement, her single-mindedness, and her intelligent and discerning judgment—were so many weapons which he now directed against her. He had hailed her formerly as the feminine impersonation of nature ; now she was all perversity, and he ascribed her infamy to the spirit of revenge of a woman who suffered in her pride and ambitions, and who had ached under the pain of social disappointment.

Would to God he had made her his mistress the day she had come to his studio for the first time !

He would have loved her for a time, but very soon lost her for ever, and she would not have had it in her power to wreck his life. The gift of imagination, which makes of an artist a visionary, was degraded to the service of his uncontrolled passions and narrow mind. The grievances of class and sex, which for ever haunt the Latin races, made him both cruel and unjust towards the woman who had captivated him, and to whom he had hitherto been both proud and happy to give himself up, body and soul. But never more would he be under her influence; never more should her arms entwine his neck, undermining his physical energy, and enervating his virile genius. But, at the same time, the man who had belittled him should never press her lovely form against his breast, nor gaze into her eyes; he would defraud destiny of her crooked designs on his happiness, by killing the man who had sneered at his agony, and Lucienne should no longer be the toy of Laya. She could look elsewhere for her pleasures, but the man who had wounded his pride would at least be out of her reach.

The blood rushed to his face when he thought of the love he had given to this woman; on how he had showered on her the best of himself. What a mockery was life! A wild desire to throttle her slender throat seized him—a morbid longing to see life escape from her lips, to watch her eyes grow dim, her mouth contract! Flashes of red light blinded him. He hated her for the power she had exercised over him; for the joys she had given him, and would never more give him. He reeled under the agony of the vision which pursued him, and leaned against a tree, waving away with his hand the tantalizing visions of love raptures which assailed him. But the obsession would soon be over, and he would leave the country for ever, after the duel. The world was wide, and his despair immense; he would carry it in his bruised heart, until having exhausted his strength, he dropped lifeless upon the bosom of nature. His children! Ah, she could keep them. He had loved them

because they were the blood of her blood ; but the sight of their fair heads brought home more cruelly the memory of the woman who had laughed him to scorn. What were they to him ? Mere bits of the flesh he had loved to desperation. They must go with her wherever she went. They belonged to her, and to that class he had despised, and which had made him suffer unto death. No—not death, but freedom ; for he would break the bond which linked him to surroundings without hearing the chain drop at his feet.

He walked on and on, unconscious of his surroundings, insensible to the weather, oblivious of time and distance, and unconsciously avoiding the roads that would lead him to Amberlé. It would be soon enough to get there and to settle with his seconds. The chemist and an American artist, who had settled in Touraine a few years ago, would act for him. He was good at fencing, therefore swords it should be. Practical thoughts pierced his tortured brain like hot needles ; but he put off facing his friends, for he was timid and sensitive whenever the realities of life had to be faced, the blood rising to his cheeks at the idea of facing a human being, and exposing his case before him—not that his delicacy rebelled against the facts of his wife's treachery being known, but because it would soon be published all over the place that he had been challenged by Roland de Laya.

The pride of the man who despises the world and its codes of honour and good behaviour, is often as sensitive as that of the man who lives according to society's rules. The former moulds the outside world according to his inner nature, and rends the air with the fierce outbursts of his grief ; whilst the latter's sole endeavour is to fit his own individuality with the exigencies of his worldly *milieu* ; he is subtle in his pleasures and cynical in his disappointments ; but both are cruel towards those through whom they are made to suffer. Cruelty and injustice are natural to the man who creates for himself a logic of life, for his passions are only the reprisals of nature against the

arbitrary doctrines which he erects as infallible rules for his daily life.

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When Darlot left the small town behind him, and entered the wood which separated Crespy from Amberlé, the spell was suddenly broken, and he was dragged down from the height of enraged passion to the paltriness of trivial arrangements which had been settled between himself and his matter-of-fact seconds. Had they burst out in bitter criticisms against society and women; had they commiserated with Jean in his grief and offended pride, he might have felt less bitter under the softening influence of self-pity; but the meetings had been commonplace. The chemist, half-shyly, half-ironically, had abstained from indiscreet questions; and, looking up from his desk, had replied, "*Très bien*, Monsieur Darlot; we shall do what is necessary." And the American artist had laconically said, "I am at your disposal, old fellow, at any time." That was all—it was trivial—and artists recoil from undramatic incidents, and from the pettiness of daily life as they would from a blast of east wind at the corner of a street. Reality was mental death to the man who lived by his imagination, to whom a visit from his picture dealer in his studio was an insult to his art, and who never, by any chance, read the newspaper criticisms on his works. The chemist's shop with its display of drugs exasperated him; what was the good of curing the body when the heart could never be healed? As to the American, notwithstanding his long residence in France, he would remain a Philistine to the end of his days, and never rise above an iniquitous mediocrity. In the depth of his despair Jean smiled at the pitiful efforts of his friend's conception of nature. The ineptitude of human beings irritated him, and the futility of their pursuits grated on his hyper-sensitive nature.

But it would soon be over, and more than ever he was bent on leaving the country and his home for ever next day. Still, before leaving, he would see Lucienne once more, and insult the woman who had brought



insult upon him. He would give blow for blow, and revenge himself on her, not only for his wrecked happiness, but for all the wounding incidents of this day ; and even for the trivial pin-pricks which his manly pride and artistic sensitiveness had suffered during the last hour.

How long he roamed in the wood he could not tell ; nor did he observe the road he had taken in leaving Amberlé. He came out of the wood at a distance of four or five miles from Crespy, and was on the high road to Tours. Long shadows were descending rapidly over the vineyards ; the river, like a silver ribbon, undulated between the dark banks, dividing the country into two different halves. The atmosphere was light and balmy, and a soft wind whispered a melancholy song through the leaves of the trees. How he had loved nature ! and this lovely corner of Touraine most of any he had seen. The dimpled smile and silvery laughter of this landscape, for ever varying in its emotions, had touched in his soul the most hidden springs of artistic ecstasy. The charm of things that one had loved and enjoyed gradually stole over his senses. He gazed upon this nature with enraptured eyes, like the lover who drinks in the beauty of his mistress, and gives her the last kiss before leaving her for ever.

The shadows thickened, the silvery river insensibly lost its shimmering brightness, and faded from his sight, mingling with the darkness of the banks ; whilst the sky, like an obscure canopy, came down to fold nature in its embrace. Jean, worn out with fatigue, sank on to a heap of stones at the side of the road, dropping his head in his hands. The incessant throbbing had ceased to beat at his temples ; and the animal in him being prostrate with exhaustion, he was less a prey to blind passion ; whilst his mind, cleared by physical exertion, was now able to disentangle the skein of his thoughts, to analyse his emotions, dissect the motives of his actions, and applaud the part he was going to play in the tragedy of life.

The man who lives by his imagination is only for a

time the prey to blind despair ; he is ultimately rescued by the power he possesses of seeing himself objectively. His mind is a mirror for ever reflecting the passions of the heart, which help to colour his artistic creations. "Cruel selfishness," some will say. "Callous indifference," others will reply. It is neither the one nor the other. The artist is unconscious, and with *naïve* sincerity he touches every note of the keyboard of emotions, giving back to his art what he has received from life. From the depths of his bleeding heart he creates everlasting works of art, inspiring in others the faith which he has lost, the passionate love which consumed his heart. He restores to humanity the worship of idealism that so bitterly disappointed him.

Silence reigned over the country, the sound of carts upon the roads had ceased ; the clatter of wooden shoes running down the paths leading from the vineyards to the banks of the river was heard no more. Occasionally, the distant barking of a dog broke the silence, and the gentle flutter of the wind through the branches of the trees brought back to Jean the sense of reality. For a long while he remained thus, weeping over himself, and approving of his resolution to leave behind him for ever all that had made him suffer. It would be the last time he would ever sit on this spot. To-morrow would end all this ; but to-night he would use the power he possessed as a man, to free himself from the influence which Lucienne had exercised over him. If anything could relieve the mental agony under which he laboured, it would be the satisfaction of insulting her, of making her suffer ; and great would be his pride in making her feel that he was now out of her reach and insensible to her fascination.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Ah, Jean !" Lucienne rose at his entrance. "How late you are ! I have waited for you all day and all the evening."

Coming close to her, he seized her two hands and peered into her face.

"Tell me—that man Laya is your lover!"

"Oh, Jean! there is nothing between us."

"Answer at once!" he shouted, holding her hands as in a vice. "What were you doing there to-day?" He pushed her away from him. "Louvier saw you going there—I followed you."

"Jean! I have tried to hide it all from you."

"Hide!" and he sneered. "I have known it all along." He let himself drop into a chair, clasping his head in his hands. "Go away! I might hurt you—oh! my mind is going."

"Jean, you must listen. It is not what you think. There is a frightful mistake somewhere—or a plot—but I am not to blame." His groans became louder. "Jean, listen!" she came nearer, and laid her hand upon his shoulder. Although she could not appease his despair, her voice calmed his anger, and he was ready to listen to her. She began her narrative with calm and firmness, and related everything that had occurred; from Marie de Cardaillan's visit to the scene in the Diane Room: she hid nothing from him, neither her appeal to the Priest nor her last appeal to Laya this very day. She even went so far as to tell him of the incident with Gaston de Laumel, and her meeting with the Dowager. It was to be a reckoning day, and for the future they should stand together side by side in the daylight of truth, with no clouds between them. Enough, too much, had been concealed. She held him spellbound under her magnetism, as she stood there motionless, her hand on his shoulder, relating calmly, strongly, convincingly, all that had happened. At last she stopped, and there was silence in the small room, a silence broken only by the monotonous ticking of the grandfather's clock. Little by little his rage abated at the narration of what had appeared so inexplicable to him. Suddenly he stood up and folded her in his arms.

"I have you still!" She hardly recognized his voice, so hoarse and moved were its tones.

"Yes—I am all yours. Do not suffer any more, my beloved. Cannot my kisses efface all traces of

grief? See, look at me, I have forgotten everything. Is not joy stronger than sorrow?"

"I believe in you—your kisses are all I want; but why not have told me sooner?"

"Ah! I feared it might worry you; the Curé also advised me not to tell you. I was wrong, but now it is over; forgive me, and let us forget."

"You do not know . . ." a sob broke from his breast.

"What is it?" She lifted her head from his shoulder. "Why do you suffer so, my own?"

"That man, then, is a worse monster than I could have believed possible—he deliberately ruined you for a pastime."

"No, no, how could he have ruined me, darling? Are we not everything to each other?" and she laid her cheek softly against his cheek.

"I cannot allow that man to live."

"Leave all that, my precious; leave these people to live their own lives. Are we not happier than they can ever be? Do not let us spoil our own happiness with the memory of such wretchedness."

"That woman enveigled you into a trap; she shall pay for it."

Lucienne laid her fingers on his lips. "Be strong, my beloved. Is not love a power? Pity those who can only hate and injure others."

"Lucienne, you do not know what you are saying; you don't know how a man loves; how he feels when the woman he loves . . ."

"Do not say it."

"No, you are right; I have you all to myself." He pressed her against his breast, his lips on her lips; but the look in his eyes had changed from a loving caress to a fierceness of passion, and to a mad despair. He held her, it was true—and the hideous nightmare of her perfidy had vanished, but the inevitable was pressing hard on them. To-morrow would soon be here—the unknown—the abyss into which perhaps their two lives would sink, was at their feet. He could not tell her; he had not the

courage to blight that fair face, to blanche those warm lips, and cloud these tender eyes. He would have her until the last hour, in all her glorious womanhood. If to-morrow had a morrow, all well; he would come back to her as he had left her; but if the next day was to be without a morrow, well, then he would at least have had her love without a shadow to darken its radiance; and would carry away in his heart her image as he had seen her last in his arms.

"Drive away all troubles; think of me as you first saw me in your studio, and of our love as it sprung up in both our hearts." Her arms were round his neck.

"No, remind me of nothing—nothing of the past, nothing of the future; let me live this minute, this hour, this night with intensity." These words were only just audible, so confused and low was the tone in which he hissed them out from between his teeth.

"Come and see the children—they are asleep," she murmured, softly.

"No," he roughly answered. "I want you alone; you—you—you!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Lucienne rose at the usual hour next morning, as the sound of the children with their gambols and laughter already filled the house.

"How early Monsieur has gone out," she said to the servant.

"Yes," answered Mariette, with her eyes fixed on Lucienne, and mouth wide open. She watched her mistress's movements, and hardly dared to speak, lest she should arouse her suspicions.

Early that morning the girl had heard from the postman that some dreadful thing was going on a mile from Amberlé—a fight—in which Monsieur was concerned. "Oh! did Madame know?" had been her constant thought until she had seen her come out of her room. "No, she certainly could not know," she decided as she watched her seat herself at her sewing-machine.

Mariette hurried out of the room, taking both children with her to the gate, where she strained

her eyes to see as far as she could along the road. The children would have liked to run free and play, but she held them tight, as if she could thus prevent bad news from approaching them. The thrashing-machine had started work, and its rhythm made a cheery accompaniment to the gossip of the villagers at the street corner. She saw women standing on their doorsteps talking mysteriously to their neighbours. The coach which went from Amberlé to the neighbouring villages rattled through the street, halting frequently to set down passengers who imparted the news. Men interrupted their work to listen ; women left their household duties to gather in the middle of the street and whisper, as is their wont, pitiful remarks about men and women. The inn-keeper, rolling his barrels along the road, suddenly stopped, and shielding his eyes with his hand, gazed into the distance at something that was coming. Then Mariette heard a rumbling of wheels—more women came out of their cottages, and looked towards the road ; more children ran out into the street, and then back to their mothers, pointing to the carriage which was coming along. Suddenly the girl saw the head of a horse turning the corner, then the driver ; and now the carriage was in full view. It seemed to her the threshing-machine had stopped—yes, it had ; there was a great silence, in which only the wheels crunching the pebbles on the road were heard. The voices had been silenced by the appearance of the closed carriage. As it turned the corner she recognized the Doctor's face inside and the two men seated in front of him. The carriage was coming nearer, it would soon be at the gate ; she must rush back to prepare madame.

"Ah! *Mon Dieu, mon Dieu!* what will she do?" She ran into the room, dragging the children after her. "Oh, Madame, do not fret too much—it is perhaps only an accident!"

Lucienne jumped up at once with a bewildered air. She seized the girl's arm.

"What is it? Who? Speak, Mariette!"

"Oh! Madame, it is Monsieur . . ."

Before the girl had finished speaking, Lucienne was out of the house, but the Doctor stood in front of her, and prevented her from going any further.

"Courage, Madame. Prepare a bed at once—keep the children away."

She obeyed, and turning back passed into the bedroom. Heavy footsteps were heard. The two men entered the house and the bedroom, and laid the body on the bed. In the hurry and confusion Lucienne had hardly time to realize what had happened; but now at the sight of the inanimate body, whose face was covered by a handkerchief, she stood rigid as a statue. Her eyes fixed on the Doctor's face, she read the fatal verdict in his expression. Frightened at her silence, at her apparent composure, he took her by the hand and led her to a chair.

"It was a duel," he whispered.

She nodded—and she knew it was all over. The Doctor's gentleness, his care of her instead of attending to the wounded man—if indeed he was only wounded—the bowed heads and reverent attitude of the two carriers were all indications that the worst had happened. Jean had hidden his duel with Laya from her. She understood now the meaning of his strange words the night before; his desperate love, and the fierceness of his passion. Oh! why had she not insisted on knowing what he meant! She might perhaps have prevented this. Why had he not confided in her? Now the inevitable had happened.

She could not bring herself to ask all the details from the Doctor. They understood each other in one look. Besides which there was nothing more to know.

Suddenly she rose, and stretching out her arms with a gesture of entreaty, she faltered—

"Let me see him."

"Be brave, Madame." The Doctor laid his hand gently on her shoulder.

"I need no courage to see his face, dead or alive." She went to the bedside, whilst the two men went noiselessly out of the room, treading on tiptoe as

though the sound of their boots might disturb that silent figure on the bed.

"He did not suffer?" she whispered, looking into the Doctor's face like a child who has implicit faith. The voice was so weak, the look so broken-hearted, that tears rose to his eyes.

"No—not for a second—I was there," and he pressed her hand gently.

"Ah!" She heaved a long deep sigh. Was it relief or oppression? Who knows; perhaps both. But in the midst of her desolation there was a sense of relief in knowing that he had not suffered. She instinctively rebelled against physical pain, and shrank from it.

She remained long gazing at Jean's face. The eyelids were closed, the nose pinched, the mouth contracted. She scrutinized every feature, bending over him; slowly she approached her warm lips to his cold mouth. It was death—icy, silent death which paralysed her limbs and froze her heart. Her whole frame began to tremble, and the Doctor beside her whispered softly—

"Think of your little ones; they will need you. You will want all your strength—spare it. Let yourself be guided."

And he gently led her across the room to the door which he opened. He called for Mariette to come to him, and Lucienne entered the room in which her children were playing on the floor.

"Hush! my little ones, papa is not well."

The children seeing her so quiet, and speaking to them so feebly, left their games and rushed to her. She sat down on a chair, and putting them both on her knees she folded them in her arms, where they remained silent and motionless.

She always had a strong and soothing influence over them; but to-day, the direful event which had befallen her gave her an even greater power over their turbulent spirits, and they stood quite still, the joyous laugh vanishing from the lips as they looked at the rigid expression on her face.

Thus the three sat locked in each other's arms, until



the mother, feeling the weight of their little bodies heavier in her arms, looked down and saw that they had fallen asleep. The beads of perspiration stood on their foreheads and round their rosy mouths, like the morning dew on the petals of roses. Her dry eyes never relaxed their fixity, and her set mouth never parted its parched lips. How long did she sit with her arms round her children? She had no notion of time—nor of her surroundings. Life had stopped with Jean's breath. She felt nothing but that cold kiss of the dead lips which had chilled her heart and stopped its beating. Her children's heavy bodies did not try her arms; nor did her enforced immobility incommode her in any way. She was in that state of physical recklessness which enables one to go through the most formidable task, or bear the most arduous fatigue without feeling in any way overtaxed. Presently she heard the door open, and the Doctor came in, followed by the servant, who took the children away.

"Madame, I am at your service for anything you may wish—there will be much to be done."

"Yes, Doctor," and Lucienne told him her wish was to take her husband's body to Paris, where his parents had a house in the suburbs. Tears and sighs have to be suppressed, for the law is close at hand to shorten the limits of grief. Doctor Besnard encouraged her to busy herself with all necessary details—he knew she had been self-possessed and healthy in her happiness, and would be equally stoical and healthy in her grief.

He felt keenly for her; left a widower himself some years previously with a delicate daughter, he had been taught the sadness of life, and had enough judgment and delicacy of feeling to see that Madame Darlot was not the heroine of a vulgar intrigue; but the victim of a social web in which many had been and many more would in the future be entangled. It was strange that not a word had been mentioned about the duel, and Jean's adversary. No doubt she knew all the incidents which had led to the duel. But what he never would forget, and that which he sincerely

hoped she never would learn, was the end. Yes—Jean had suffered—it had been short, but the agony of the last minutes had been cruel, and the effort he had made to curse his enemy at the last had brought on a hemorrhage. Doctor Besnard felt he would never forget the faces of these two men : the one lying on the ground, the other kneeling beside him, listening to his imprecations in silence.

As he left the Farm the Doctor met several men at the gate who wished to know some details. The blacksmith stood at the door of his forge ; the inn-keeper at his door ; the postman returned from his rounds stood talking to the grocer ; the little widow stood at her door gossiping to old Madame Louvier.

" *Mon Dieu ! Mon Dieu !* These men, they will kill each other for women ! "

" Humph ! I don't know what they see in her," and Madame Louvier went off with her heavy bundle of grass on her back.

The group of women standing about in the road made way for the Doctor as he came along, and they looked mournfully and inquisitively into his face. But he only nodded to them and passed on.

" Ah ! it's the children I pity—with no father," said the postman's wife.

" And with worse than no mother," added the seamstress.

The Mayoress had pushed her shutters aside, and peered all round to see whom she could find to talk to. Seeing the Doctor she disappeared and closed the window, for her costume lacked neatness and even cleanliness.

" She will have to wear black now," she murmured between her teeth, and she reflected complacently that this might not be quite so becoming as the natty summer frocks and fetching hats in which Lucienne generally appeared.

" A bad business, Louvier," said Valette the cooper, as he saw the old peasant mopping his brow with a chequered handkerchief.

" Ah ! that's life ! Yesterday here ;—to-morrow—

who knows where?" and with a contemptuous wave of the hand old Louvier expressed his cynical view of life, of hereafter, and of human passions in general.

The Doctor caught sight of the Curé talking with the Mayor at the end of the village; he soon overtook them, and the three men went together to Amberlé.

"I do not suppose there will be a religious ceremony here?" grimly asked the Priest.

"No, she wishes to take his body to his parents' home near Paris," replied the Doctor.

"Much wiser," added the Mayor, who felt embarrassed how to behave towards Lucienne. "The best thing she could do would be to take herself off also."

"A terribly sad thing for a young woman," and Doctor Besnard shook his head.

"It all comes of mixing in a different sphere from one's own," sulkily remarked the Abbé Martin.

"Still, a young woman, beautiful as she is, is naturally destined to be admired and run after." The Doctor had been, in his modest sphere and limited field of provincial society, a great admirer of the fair sex, and had acquired a certain knowledge of feminine psychology. He was on good terms with every one, squires or peasants, and could converse on literature and plastic art at the Château, as well as he could discuss the good points of the last vintage with the wine growers.

"Anyhow, a woman who allows herself to be compromised by Monsieur de Laya does not deserve much of our pity." The Mayor took off his straw hat, for the morning was exceptionally hot.

"That dare-devil would compromise one of the statues on the Place de la Concorde if he felt so inclined." The Doctor winked his eye mischievously.

The Curé was hurrying to catch an early train to Tours—he was not sorry to have to go, for it prevented him from going to sympathize with Lucienne in her distress. His large cassock swayed from right to left, and he held his umbrella in his right hand, striking the stones on the road and sending them along like balls. It was a relief not to have to recite the prayers

over the dead body. Of course he had never expected to be called in by Lucienne, and he blinded himself into believing that his reticence in going to see her originated from a sense of discretion.

"Who is that coming along?" The Mayor stood still in the road, looking at two men who were walking briskly towards them.

"It must be Monsieur de Savigny and his cousin, coming back to Crespy. They stopped at Amberlé after the duel, to have some breakfast."

The two parties were now close to one another, and presently they met and exchanged greetings. Edmond addressed himself to the Abbé Martin in tones of respect. "I am truly sorry, Monsieur le Curé, that such a terrible event should happen in your quiet parish."

"Ah! Monsieur le Marquis, it might all have been averted, if that poor man had looked after his wife more closely." The Curé knitted his brow, and looked uncomfortable. If *he* had possessed such a woman he would have watched over her more jealously, he thought.

"Bah! there are some women one cannot watch over." Monsieur de Laumel looked like a man who had seen a ghost, although he vainly tried to assume an appearance of ease as he gazed at the Curé through his eye-glass.

"The woman does not in the least interest me," severely added Edmond de Savigny; "but I am glad that the man's honour was saved, for I cannot bear to think of any man as accepting his wife's treachery with indifference."

"Nevertheless, Monsieur le Marquis, a man's life is a serious thing, and the scene we have witnessed this morning is one that I shall not forget for many a day," said the Doctor, putting on his hat.

"It is certainly a great misfortune," added Gaston, "and no one feels it more than poor Laya;—I have never seen a man more cut up."

"A duel like that is a butchery," remarked the Priest, who had been silently observing Gaston as they talked.

"Monsieur le Curé, there are occasions when a

butchery is a holy sacrifice on the altar of honour," dryly answered the Marquis de Savigny, bowing to the three men.

"And when one thinks that all this has happened—for a woman!" exclaimed the Mayor, walking along with his two companions. His voice and gestures expressed the greatest amazement; for his past amours had been of so trivial and undramatic a nature, that he felt quite overwhelmed by the magnitude of the tragedy that had been enacted within a few miles of his home.

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## CHAPTER XV

"ONLY an American would do such a thing," exclaimed Edmond de Savigny, throwing the newspaper on the table, one morning about ten days after Darlot's death.

"What is it?" inquired the Dowager, from her corner of the drawing-room, from which she observed her grandchildren.

"Imagine a Chicago millionaire purchasing Darlot's last picture for one thousand pounds!" said Gaston de Laumel, reading the small paragraph in the daily paper. "This is the climax of commercial advertisement!"

"From a menagerie to our lovely Châteaux, nothing comes amiss to an American business man!" and Hélène giggled.

"They rob us of all our old titles, to turn out a generation of bounders," Edmond sourly remarked.

"Whose fault is it, my dear child?" The old lady's eyes fixed themselves on him. "Our nobility has lost all sense of dignity in coupling itself with the Yankees; for, you must remember, the *bounders*, as you call them, are not all on the Atlantic shores; the bargain is duly reciprocated, and if they invade our Parisian fortifications with their pockets full of dollars, no doubt it is because our old society plays the part of a beggar, and exposes her dilapidated goods to the sharp eyes of America's millionaires."

"At any rate," said Gaston, "American girls are more amusing than our own girls; they are fresh—and I believe they are not less innocent. Then they have the great charm of possessing all the seductive power of a courtesan, without the cynical mind and physical wear and tear of the woman who makes a profession of what the other takes up as a casual sport."

"Those are not exactly the qualities you would desire for the mothers of your children," severely said Gertrude, as she closed the open window. The evenings were cooler.

"I don't think we can boast much of our strictly brought up girls. Look at Yvonne de Laya—what a scandal that will be!" Gaston sneered.

"Wherever Laya is concerned there is sure to be a scandal," retorted Edmond.

"I cannot understand you all," broke in the Dowager. "The scandal of Monsieur de Laya's *liaison* with Marie did not seem to shock the sensitive feelings of society—and now you hoot and cry at Yvonne for kicking over the traces at last."

"You must not forget, my dear Grandmother, that Madame de Laya and her mother accepted the state of affairs; therefore it did not behove society to disapprove of the *liaison*, and they shut their eyes accordingly," dryly replied Edmond.

"But Roland's divorce will make it all public," added the Dowager.

"Ah! Yvonne de Laya is a little minx who only cried out when she found it to her interest to do so," and Hélène laughed.

"I do not think she is more to blame than Marie de Cardaillan, who had also to complain of her idiot of a husband," went on the Dowager.

"I dare say not," replied Gaston. "But Marie had the good taste to smile gracefully at her husband's misdemeanors, and never made the name she bore notorious in halfpenny newspapers."

"The whole thing is revolting," exclaimed Edmond. "A woman who overlooked her husband's conduct had no right suddenly to free herself from her conjugal

duties—besides, we all know Yvonne finds her consolation in the society of Henri de Terrac."

"Still, whether she accepts the husband's conduct, or prefers to make a scandal over it—I cannot see that the morality is different for the one or the other," coldly said the Dowager.

"Excuse me," Gaston interposed, "morality strictly speaking is all right for those classes who have no social standing to keep up; but in our circles, morality is softened by shades of good breeding which do away with its hardest rules."

"Yes, no doubt Tolstoi's doctrine of retribution would find no favour in our worldly spheres!" In thus speaking the Dowager gave way to her spirit of mischief and love of teasing her children.

"I beg of you, my dear Grandmother, do not bring such subversive doctrines to bear on the grave questions of social discipline," said Edmond severely.

"There is no doubt," added Gertrude, "that *Resurrection*, and such works, are most dangerous to read. They are false from cover to cover. In fact, they are forbidden by the ecclesiastical law." Gertrude considered the last reason the strongest argument against the fallacious doctrine of the Russian reformer.

"Could you imagine a state of society in which our sons would seek in marriage the hand of your lady's-maid, or of the farm-maid, with the idea of rehabilitating their reputations? It would indeed be paying a high price for a few hours of folly!" and Gaston threw himself back in his chair laughing.

"Morality is closely bound up with the social question," continued Edmond, "and the great offender is the one who disregards appearances and creates a public scandal."

"By the way, I have found Nietzsche's book you were asking for," suddenly interrupted Hélène, getting up and taking a book from the table. "It was in Marie de Cardaillan's room."

"At last, it is found—I should hardly think that was the kind of literature to appeal to Marie," answered the old Marquise.

The folding doors leading to the bedroom were now thrown open, and the Dowager was wheeled away after saying good-night to her grandchildren.

Since the scandal of Lucienne Darlot, and the departure of Madame de Cardaillan, the Dowager had relapsed into a persistent silence, which her *entourage* attributed to approaching senility ; and after Darlot's death, Edmond and Gertrude had discussed at some length the way in which the event ought to be announced to her. They feared that the news would revive the tragic memories of the past, and reopen an old wound which a similar event had inflicted on her young heart. Still, it was necessary to tell her of it, lest she might hear the news from some one else. As usual, the Savignys were deputed to inform their Grandmother of the sad details of the duel, and they were more than ever convinced that she was not all there, when she received the news with perfect composure. For them this callousness was a sure sign of decrepitude, and her obstinate silence made them believe that she was not quite conscious of all that went on around her.

Since then no one had spoken of the tragedy in her presence, and she had never mentioned Lucienne's name. She had accepted the facts of the scandal without ever once referring to it ; and listened to the final catastrophe without any outward signs of emotion. But they none of them were aware how her love of minutiae often made her go over the incident when she was alone, and how she would sit for hours murmuring unintelligible words which betrayed her irritation. Whether her irascibility was caused by the scandal or by her inability to accept the facts of the story, none of her people ever knew—even more—they preferred to think she was indifferent to outward events and solely interested in that past, which they believed to be a perfect mania with her.

She sat in her usual place at her desk, living over again her early days in this room, which brought back all the events of her life. She held Nietzsche's works in her hands, and from the memories of her past she



suddenly came down to the present, and wondered why Marie had taken this book. The weighty memories of her youth filled her mind, but the little haunting query pierced through the great wave of thought, as the icy blast cuts through a dense forest without shaking the strong stems of its trees, although its passing is heard from one end to the other. The little insignificant detail persistently recurred to her mind as she carefully turned the leaves of the book and read paragraph after paragraph. She would sometimes pass over several pages, at other times she would raise the book close to her eyes to see that she had not made a mistake. As she did this a few leaves of notepaper dropped out of the book and fell on the carpet; the Dowager stooped to pick them up, and laid them on her lap. There was an open letter between the sheets of paper, in a handwriting she did not know. For a long time she scrutinized both the letter and the sheets of paper, which were all scribbled over. She went from one to the other, murmuring the words she read, as she compared the writing in the letter with that on the sheets of white paper. Her hands trembled a little when, after a long time of minute attention, she replaced the papers inside the book; but the expression on her features revealed no astonishment, nor any emotion as she placed the book in one of the pigeon-holes of her desk, and rang her bell for Félicie to come to undress her.

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"Madame Darlot did not write that letter to Monsieur de Laya." The shrill voice of the Dowager broke the silence, when next day after luncheon her grandchildren were sipping their coffee in her drawing-room. The two men turned their heads towards her; Gertrude frowned, and Hélène tossed her little head, saying saucily—

"What letter?"

"It was Marie de Cardaillan who forged the letter." This time the voice sounded authoritative, and the wizened old figure in the arm-chair had the appearance of a Sibyl announcing a weird oracle.

"Do you mean that old story? Rather stale to rake that up now," and H  l  ne put down her cup.

"May I ask what has made you arrive at that conclusion?" ironically inquired the Marquise de Savigny.

"I have the proofs here." The old Marquise laid her hand on a black reticule hanging on the arm of her chair.

"Ha! ha! ha! That's just like Marie! What a joke to play on Roland!" Gaston was pleased that, after all, his Nymph had not preferred Laya to him, although he had altogether forgotten that she had aroused his passion for the inside of a month; for there is a code of honour even for the dog in the manger.

"May I see these proofs?" Edmond stood at his Grandmother's side with that offensive attention which at times irritated every one whom he came across—whether they were farm-labourers or members of his Club in Paris. The Dowager opened her bag, and taking out the sheets of paper handed them to him.

"Here they are. She copied the handwriting over and over again from a letter of Madame Darlot's."

"This is a very serious affair," muttered Edmond under his breath. "How very careless of her to leave these sheets in a book—a servant might have got hold of them."

Gaston looked over his cousin's shoulder, and attentively eyed the documents with his one eyeglass.

"Well! it will be the first time Roland has been taken in—and by a woman!"

"I pity Marie if he ever knows the truth—his revenge will be terrible," said H  l  ne in a frivolous voice which contrasted strangely with the gravity of her speech.

"Where did she obtain the letter to copy from?" Gertrude knitted her brow; it annoyed her that the scandal which she had made the most of turned out to be a fabrication. She was disinclined to redeem the character of a woman to whom in her own mind

she had condemned ; and most unwilling to throw the blame on any one who belonged to her world. She did not object so much to Marie being a shameless character so long as Lucienne was equally reprehensible ; but the moment that the latter turned out to be the innocent victim of a planned calumny, she felt her sympathies were entirely on the side of the calumniator. " What interest could Marie have had for plotting such a silly affair ? " sententiously added Gertrude. " One must keep cool in this matter, and not condemn her only on appearances."

" A man's life was sacrificed to appearances, as you call it ; you speak of it lightly." The sibyl's voice was shriller than ever.

" My dear Grandmother, doubtless the case is a very bad one ; but sooner or later the man would have had to defend his honour—with a wife like his," severely replied Edmond.

" Besides which, it is better to die at the hand of a gentlemanly adversary, than by that of a ragamuffin," remarked Gaston.

" You settle that question off very quickly," said the Dowager ; " but what of the woman whose life and name have been ruined ? "

" Oh, my dear Grandmother ! whoever thinks of that scandal any more ? " quickly remarked Hélène.

" Who talks of any scandal after a week ? " added Gaston.

" The best thing to do is to burn these papers, and to think no more about it," said Edmond.

" And to leave the woman to bear the burden of another's crime ? " muttered the Dowager.

" Bah ! the hand of Time effaces these wrongs of life." Gaston had returned to the mantelpiece, and was studying the pattern of the carpet with philosophic resignation. " It is so difficult to know how much one woman is innocent and another culpable."

" And then, how could this wrong be redressed unless Madame Darlot was acquainted with the facts of the case ? " inquired Edmond, folding up the sheets of paper with his hard sinewy fingers.

"That would be impossible!" retorted Gertrude.

"Well, that would be the climax!" gasped H  l  ne.

"My advice would be to bury this painful affair," began Edmond pompously. "Let it remain between us five—it is much the best. The whole thing is bad enough, without making it much worse."

"You call worse—the rehabilitation of a wronged woman?"

"My dear Grandmother, I call very much worse, the bringing forward of another culprit. How do we know for a fact that Marie is the only one to blame in this, or whether Madame Darlot is altogether the victim of this regrettable intrigue?"

"You are right, my dear Edmond," said Gertrude. "I think silence will be the best policy. And then, it is a very delicate subject to approach with Marie, who would never forgive us for suspecting her."

"We must not forget that Marie is related to us, and to the Vallorbes," added Edmond.

"My dear Gertrude," broke in H  l  ne, "I don't often agree with you, but this time I do; and I certainly prefer standing by Marie, however depraved she may be;—one must show some *esprit de famille* in a serious case like this."

"It is just what we were saying last night," said Edmond, with irritation. "Here is a case of social morality; and there is no doubt that the question of principle is plain, and that our duty to society is to shield the one who would suffer the most from public scandal."

"You do not realize, my dear Grandmother, the harm there would be in sacrificing any one in Marie's position, to save the reputation of a woman in Madame Darlot's position—or rather, lack of position."

"Edmond and Gertrude are quite right," said Gaston. "Think one minute of the harm that such a revelation would cause, especially at present, when society is the object of all the Socialists' attacks. No one in our world will think any more of this affair; and the incident of Laya's intrigue and duel will be treated as a village melodrama, and will be forgotten

together with the name of the heroine ; whereas Marie's scandal—were it made public—would be the talk of all Paris, and the duration of the gossip would naturally be in proportion to her position—which is great in our world."

"You cannot realize the danger of such an exposure, my dear Grandmother. We should be the object of low attacks in every newspaper ; and Crespy-sur-Roc would be put down as the resort for illicit amours. Let me entreat of you to drop this painful subject," pleaded Gertrude.

"Allow me to destroy these papers—they are most compromising," and Edmond had already torn the sheets in half, when the shrill voice of the Dowager broke in—

"How dare you tear that paper ! It is my business to judge what is right in this matter." The little wrinkled fingers seized the bits of paper from Edmond, who gave them up to her with closed lips and knitted brow.

The Dowager belonged too much to an old world not to know quite well that the weak must in many cases be sacrificed to the strong ; and that it was a duty to keep up the edifice of society and never to allow any one to hurl a stone at it ; but she was contradictory, and loved to tease her grandchildren ; whilst despising in her heart their mental inferiority, she recognized their superiority in the social edifice. She was very fond of exercising her despotic power, especially over Edmond, whose mediocrity irritated her, the more so as he was the son of her only son, and the head of the family. As long as she lived, she would never relinquish her prerogatives which she held direct from her father, the Marshal de Crespy ; this her entourage was well aware of, and in consequence they felt quite easy as to her behaviour towards Lucienne.

The Savignys and Laumels were now as eager to forget the facts of the case as they had before been eager to spread about the scandal in their worldly circles. They were logical in the fitting of circum-

stances to their views of thinking, and judged events according to the social standing of those who played a part in them. Lucienne was not of their set; therefore, the discovery of the fraud did not create in their minds the same degree of indignation which it might have done had she been a woman of the world. As to the hero of the scene, Laya's reputation could no longer be saved—besides, it would be cruel and unfair to rob him of the credit of such an adventure. Why should he be known openly to have been the victim of a practical joke?

It is that strange fool's paradise in which society people live that makes them believe they can make or unmake reputations at their will. They only consider justice and injustice as far as their own opinion on the question drives them one way or the other. They ignore the fact that any one could suffer from injustice when they have not credited the injury as such. So it happened that from gossip-mongers the Savignys turned into wiseacres, and kept to themselves the news which would have harmed the name of one who belonged to their own world. It was not out of wilful malice that they acted thus; but simply out of that long-inherited instinct of self-preservation which causes organized societies, like animals and human beings, to defend themselves against the attacks from outside.

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## CHAPTER XVI

WHEN a great affliction befalls us, the days that follow seem strange and unreal, and everything around loses its proper value and perspective. The past and the future sink into oblivion, and the present, in all its magnified realism, sets its heel upon our breast, oppressing us, and stunning our senses into a complete

state of stupor and indifference to the passage of time.

Lucienne, suddenly transplanted after the shock of Jean's death from her own home to her father-in-law's house at Neuilly, had not yet fully realized what had happened, nor had she quite comprehended her loss. She went about doing everything that had to be done as one in a trance, unconscious of days and seasons. She went through the customary duties that follow such events, without evincing the slightest interest in what was going on around her.

Nothing in his parents' home reminded her of her happy life with Jean, as the house where she had first known him had been given up by the old people some years ago for this one. The children even seemed altered in their new surroundings ; their boisterousness had changed to nervous awkwardness, and they could not understand why their father was not there, why their mother was so silent ; nor could they make out why grandpapa sniffled in his grey beard, nor what could cause their granny to forget to bring out the jam for *godâter*.

Then a certain amount of business had to be attended to, although this was soon settled. Jean had left everything to his wife, and, together with what the old people would leave at their death, the children and Lucienne would be well provided for until the former were able to earn their own living. Lucienne took no active part in anything, but appeared indifferent to everything and every one. Her tearless silence terrified her mother-in-law, who wore out her grief in loquacious gossip and exuberant gestures. The latter dreaded silence, was passionate and noisy, and from morning till night she raved at the upper classes, accusing them of having caused her son's death. She never entered the studio to remain any length of time, and could not understand how Lucienne stayed there for hours, silently gazing at the old man as he worked at his clay figures, and listening to the soft murmur of his voice.

After at first having given way to a sort of whim-

pering despair, old Darlot had taken up his work again, and was modelling small busts of his son at different ages. He would sometimes approach Lucienne, to show her what he had done, and she would approve with a faint smile and a nod. The old man suffered plaintively, and nourished a grievance against society of a milder nature than that of his wife. For hours he would knead his clay, until his old fingers had formed features which satisfied his keen sense of art ; and a complacent smile flitted over his pale lips, while he hummed between his teeth the old nursery rhymes which he used to sing to his boy. Thus he consoled himself for his great loss, in adding another memento in his studio. The place was full of souvenirs of all those he had loved and lost : a medallion of his mother hung against the wall ; the bust of a sister who had died very young stood in one corner ; and any amount of statuettes of a child they had lost at three years old were placed about on oak chests, tables, and even on the floor. Very soon the busts of his son would find their places in this gallery of lost ones.

Old Darlot was the true artist who loved art for art's sake ; for he had soon realized that fame would never come to him, and that he would never command the artistic market. He worked for himself—for his own pleasure and artistic sense of beauty—and apart from the work he executed for art dealers, he had some years ago begun to sculpture the busts of the principal personages of the French Revolution, which he intended, at his death, to give to a Museum. The happy and disinterested artist spent his best hours in his studio, reading the greatest authorities on the Revolution, and studying the psychology of men like Robespierre, Danton and Marat, in whom he ever discovered new facial characteristics, as he analyzed more and more deeply the motives of their actions. He was uneducated, that is to say, he had not passed through the college curriculum which enabled a man to enter diverse professions ; but he had read widely, and reflected moreover on all he had seen and read,



perhaps the more because he had chosen his subjects according to his tastes, and judged life from his own independent standpoint.

Son of an artisan, he was apprenticed as a joiner in his father's workshop until he was fifteen, when he obtained permission to enter the studio of one of the greatest sculptors of the day; and at the death of his parents he inherited the small fortune which they had amassed *sou* by *sou* in the trade. His wife brought him a nice little *dot*, and, with what he managed to earn by working for art dealers, they both lived comfortably, and were able to give their son Jean a good education, and the best artistic training. But the old man never rose above the level of industrial art, and the committee which judged of the pictures and sculptures at the yearly *salon* invariably pooh-poohed his productions, and treated him as a harmless *amateur* slightly tainted with revolutionary ideas. He smiled each time that his busts or groups came back refused by the Jury, never murmuring against fate, nor envying those who passed in front of him to reach the highest pinnacle of fame.

A few days before the date fixed for Lucienne and her children to return to Crespy, she received a letter from a solicitor informing her that a sum of four hundred pounds was lying in such-and-such a bank for her.

"Well, I suppose it is from your mother," exclaimed Madame Darlot, the mother. "Who else could it be? Hey! the chicks will be rich some day, no doubt, and all will be well. Have you really no idea who she can be, Lucienne?" The dark eyes flashed, and her gestures revealed a nervous excitement and curiosity which she could hardly control.

"Not the slightest, my dear mother."

"I should have thought that at Crespy—amongst the people you associated with—you could have discovered something about her." Lucienne made an uneasy movement. "Well, I don't see," went on Madame Darlot, "why you should not have tried

to find out who your mother was—it only seems natural that you should do so.”

“Why should I worry about it?” inquired Lucienne.

“Humph! you take it very coolly—I never saw any one like you,” went on the old woman, moving about the room to tidy up with a great display of activity.

“For some reason or other she wishes to remain unknown, let her do so”—and Lucienne looked out of the window at her children coming home from their walk.

“I could not accept the position as you do, I should turn every stone until I had made her come out of her shell—at any rate I should be more indignant than you are. She must belong to the aristocracy, no doubt; for no woman in our class would ever disown her child. It is only in the upper classes that such things are done!” The old woman, having shot her arrow at society, settled down to her task of darning the linen.

“But she does think of me, as you see; therefore she does love, in her way—why should we judge her?” answered Lucienne.

“Ha! ha! you call that loving! You are not exacting, you easily accept life’s injustice. I suppose you think it *distingué* to be self-controlled. Bah! it’s because you don’t feel as *we* do that you can remain for hours there, silent; you and father, you have fishes’ blood in your veins!” When the old woman started one of her harangues, everything had to give way, nothing could stop her flow of language, it had to run its course until some obstacle forced the current into another channel. Generally the gentle touch of old Darlot’s hand on her shoulder brought her back to more indulgent sentiments towards her daughter-in-law; she would then feel ashamed of her outbursts of bad temper, and shaking off the gentle pressure of his hand would roughly remark—

“Oh! you—you are too good to live. You allow every one to walk over your corns!”

The children were to remain a few days yet with their grandparents, and having decided to leave next day, Lucienne sent a post-card to Mariette.

All Crespy was informed that Madame Darlot was coming back to the Farm. The postman communicated the news to the Mayor's servant, the grocer spoke about it to the blacksmith, and the innkeeper informed the Curé of the event. In fact, all the neighbourhood was acquainted with Lucienne's return when she alighted at Amberlé. She had her luggage sent on by the coach, and went on foot so as to be alone and not to have to answer the peasants' questions, nor to thank them for their sympathy. She crossed over the bridge. The sun was setting over the Loire and was still very hot, the summer having been an exceptionally dry one. She took the little path along the river, it was cooler and more isolated. Still under the spell of her quiet despair, Lucienne passed by all the spots where Jean had sat for hours with her, without yet realizing her utter solitude. In front there was a curtain of poplar trees, which he had often taken as a background for his sketches; and that blue sky, with white cotton-wool clouds, had many a time tried his patience, when he strove to fix its lightness on his canvas; but she noticed nothing now, and hurried on without looking back, or even casting a side glance on the road. On she went with her eyes upon the ground, crushing underfoot the yellow leaves which were already falling from the trees.

She passed a group of trees on her right, and suddenly Crespy-sur-Roc, with its feudal towers standing on the granite rock, was in full view, clearly outlined against the blue sky. She bowed her head and had to halt. It was a shock, and she felt a choking feeling at her throat, whilst a sharp pain pierced through her forehead like the cut of a steel blade. Very soon the first houses in the village were within a stone's-throw, and the various sounds which constitute its daily life were quite audible; but her senses were numb and she hardly felt the ground on

which she trod. She scarcely recognized the women and children who passed in and out of houses, and the noise of the blacksmith's hammer was inaudible to her, as if she had cotton-wool in her ears. She only thought of going on, although the road seemed eternally long. She felt sure that at the Farm, in her own environment, she would lose this dreadful feeling of unreality, and this inertness of all her being, which made her insensible to outward impressions.

She was in the village now. Children ran back to their mothers to tell them of Madame Darlot's home-coming; mothers came out to stare at Lucienne as she hurried along heedless of those who watched her. The two rows of houses between which she walked seemed to close in upon her; breathless and oppressed she realized nothing but the intense longing to reach the Farm, to find there, reality and life's pulsation. She was in front of the iron gate, she entered, and crossed the courtyard. She stood on the threshold. Mariette had rushed forward hearing footsteps, but she stood speechless at the bewildered expression on her mistress's face.

Lucienne stood in the middle of the room, looking round at the old clock, the dresser, the piano; and for the first time since she left her home a fortnight ago, she realized her complete loneliness in this place where the beloved's voice would never more be heard. She moved a few steps forward, but feeling suddenly weak she clutched Mariette's arm, and broke into a torrent of tears.

"Mariette—Mariette! What will become of me—without him?" Her whole body shook under the violence of her sobs. "You do not know—ah, you cannot know what it is!"

"That is right, Madame, weep." The girl patted Lucienne on the shoulder, not knowing what to say, for she had not yet suffered in that way. She let her cry, moan, sob, in the agony of her despair; and when the struggle was too much for her and she began to get hysterical, the girl tried to soothe her by speaking softly to her, as to a child. "There, there, it will do

you good—you will sleep well afterwards," incoherent words which were interrupted by heart-breaking moans. At last she drew herself up, and her sobs became less violent; the girl led her to a chair, and Lucienne, leaning on the table, buried her head in her hands.

"Take this, Madame"—Mariette brought a glass of water—"drink, it will calm you." She tried to raise Lucienne's head, but prostration had followed nervous excitement, and she lay helpless, tears rolling down her cheeks. Such a grief seemed very strange to Mariette, and the dread of the unknown seized her. She watched her in silence, powerless to console her poor mistress. What a home-coming it was for her, and how ever would she bear solitude, thought Mariette.

It was getting dark, the furniture in the room was hardly visible now. The girl wondered if Madame would remain long in that condition. The supper was prepared for her; would she eat it? She lit the lamp and drew the curtains with a sharp jerk, making all the rings clatter on the rod. Lucienne did not move, her head still in her hands, she was leaning on the table, sobbing unceasingly. Mariette came close to her, but did not say a word, for she did not know what words to use. The same thought kept recurring to her mind: that it was a sad home-coming for her mistress. She whispered something about supper being ready; sobs alone answered her. She watched silently over the prostrate form, until the sobs calmed down, and Lucienne, lifting her head, gazed round the room with a half-dazed look. Mariette, leaning over her, said—

"Madame, come to bed—it will rest you, to-morrow you will be stronger," and the young woman got up in obedience to the girl, who led her to her room.

Dropping to sleep from sheer exhaustion, only for a short time, she suddenly awoke, feeling in her feverish excitement the body of her husband close to her. She sat up in bed, straining her eyes to see through the opaque darkness, and trying to listen to

a voice which was not to be heard. Then, reality came back to her with a rush, and she fell back on her pillows writhing in the agony of despair, murmuring incoherent words of passionate endearment. For hours she rehearsed the scene when Jean was brought home dead and laid in this bed ; she passed in review every detail of that day with vivid precision. Then, the night when she had watched his body came back to her, and every incident of it was now as painfully real as it had been then. How was it that she had not recalled these details when she was at Neuilly ? She was then a mere machine grinding out the days and hours. She cried and moaned until every nerve in her body relaxed, and towards the small hours of the morning a beneficent somnolence enveloped her senses.

After the frenzy of despair in which we shriek and tear ourselves to bits, we come at last, with bleeding and aching heart, to firmer ground. We are no more tossed from peak to peak, and the heavy weight which crushed us into inertness has been lifted from our breast. We begin to realize our surroundings, and though perhaps unable as yet to contemplate the past, we begin to remember that there will be a to-morrow, and that many more to-morrows will follow, bringing their own contingent of bitterness and disappointment. Who can say if that first state of mute despair, in which we took no notice of anything, was not preferable ? For the lifting of the weight on our breast has brought consciousness back to us, and given us a glimpse of the future, and of all it holds in reserve for us. Before, we were felled to the ground, speechless and senseless ; now, we are conscious of despair, and all hope vanishes. This is the next phase of sorrow, when fever parches the skin, and heightens the colour, as we look into the future which unfolds itself before our gaze. With bleeding hearts we contemplate the picture of our future life of loneliness, until one by one the black clouds which hid the past from us are dispelled, and the tantalizing picture of our past happiness appears in all its cruel glory.

Shivering from head to foot, we listen to the sweet murmurings of the loved voice that is no more ; we feel the warm kisses that will never again touch our lips ; and we writhe under the acute torture which the memory of past joys brings back to us. We weep bitter tears of self-pity over our sorrowful fate, as we are more and more able to adjust the objects in our surroundings ; we suffer more acutely as we become able to judge more lucidly, and we revolt the more fiercely against suffering, as we more clearly realize past joys, and future loneliness.

It is not when the slave is bound hand and foot that he rebels against his fate, and longs for freedom ; but only when his bonds are a little loosened, or his chains detached, that he can perceive a future of liberty. In that glimpse of a bright horizon, he realizes his present thralldom, and thirsts for emancipation.

There are various phases in grief, which serve to prepare us for a time when oblivion will smooth away all bitterness. But how many stages to go through yet !—Stages in which we feel a kind of misery at not being able to grieve quite as much as we used to—phases in which we feel remorse at being able to take an interest in our surroundings. It is not that one really misses the stinging torture of past despair ; but one reproaches oneself for thinking less of it, one parts from one's dark companion—despair—with reluctance, and one is inclined to consider it wrong to be attracted by anything else but our engrossing grief. When the successive stages of despair have passed away, the grieving heart is divided in two : one half which mourns, the other half which slowly recovers ; it is a psychological duel between the two halves until the hour strikes when consolation opens her swift wide wings, and carries the combatants away from all strife. Oblivion gradually steals over memory, throwing into shade the image of a once dearly-loved face ; and one tries to recall the features which seem to be slipping from remembrance.

Ah ! there is indeed a sadness in recovering from

the sting of despair ! There is bitter self-reproach at not being any longer the prey of the past, combined with long hours of self-commiseration during which the bleeding heart feels a kind of satisfaction in its own suffering.

Oblivion is a mental death—a becalming of all the senses, in which the yells of despair become silenced, and the stinging pain is lulled. The struggle is over ; the soul's battlefield is cleared. The dead are numbered and buried ; the wounded carried away. The earth has absorbed the blood, and the sun shines serenely over the place which is once more ready for future battles.

Peace now reigns between the past and the future ; we know that we have gained complete mastery over ourselves ; and although we feel that some dreadful calamity has passed over our heads, we still very vaguely expect some miracle to be accomplished—something marvellous to happen : the revelation that to-morrow keeps for us boundless joys which we shall accept with delight.

The heavy weight of despair is lifted from our breast. Life has at last conquered Death !

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## CHAPTER XVII

SUMMER was nearly over ; the vintage had drawn all the able-bodied inhabitants of Crespy into the fields, leaving only the octogenarians to look after the children in the village. The atmosphere was redolent of the scent of new wine ; and a continuous sound was heard of barrels being rolled in and out of the deep caves, or of the loaded carts lumbering heavily down between six and seven o'clock in the evening towards the wine-presses. In these closely-packed barrels were centred all the interests of the



village ; the very life and prosperity of a population who lived from year to year alternating between the hopes of success and the dread of failure.

Even the Curé awoke from his usual apathy to leave his Presbytery, and mix with his parishioners as they worked amongst the vines. He had jokes for the women, coarse jests for the men, and a pat on the head for the children ; and when his dark robe had disappeared behind the poplar trees, the general verdict was that Monsieur le Curé was "a good fellow upon the whole !" It was the only time of the year when he seemed to give a little of himself to his surroundings ; and the reason of this was not that he took any more interest in them or their pursuits on this occasion, but because the season of the vintage brought periodically back to his memory the recollections of his childhood, that period of his life which had preceded the time when his soul had been immured behind the high walls of the Seminary. The military service and the clerical education are the trainings which deaden body and soul. What military discipline does to ruin a young body, crushing innocence out of its nature, turning love into sexual licence, and obedience into abject servility, the Seminary accomplished for those youthful minds, whose sanguine faith they turn into a morbid contempt for life.

It was the only few weeks in the long year when the Abbé Martin felt once more a healthy, free peasant, with all the aspirations of a man whose education had extended the narrow horizon of a labourer. When on his way home he passed the old Farm, he invariably looked at the windows and knitted his brows, and he would quicken his steps until he was safe once more within the walls of his Presbytery.

Early in the month of October, as he passed the Farm one day on his way home, he caught sight of Lucienne in the courtyard.

Since her return to Crespy, he had not once been to call upon her. He told himself he had been too

busy—what with the re-opening of the village school, and the illness of old Louvier, who had had a bad turn and constantly calling for him to come—not for any spiritual mission—but simply to have the opportunity of opening a bottle of old Nazelles which the doctor had forbidden him to taste, he had had his hands too full for paying visits, he assured himself. In his inner heart he was irritated with Madame Darlot, and had come to the conclusion that the whole mischief had been caused by her imprudence. He had warned her many a time against Roland de Laya; in fact, against the whole set to which he belonged. But women were all alike—inconsistent and easily carried away. He was convinced that they all courted danger, and when on the very edge of a precipice, they would cry out for help. He could not help her; and Laya had been the means of wrecking her whole life; but there was no doubt in his mind, that she, through inconsiderate conduct, had been the cause of her husband's death. Thus he argued with himself; and lulling his conscience into complete torpor as regards his own cowardice towards Lucienne, he allowed himself to be out of temper with her for what he believed to be foolish in her actions.

Lucienne did not miss the Priest's visits, nor any one's visits; for three weeks she had shut herself up in the Farm; never going outside the gate nor saying a word to any outsiders. Solitude was the one desire at present. She passed through cruel hours of despair, as she lay prostrate on her bed during the long nights. During these lonely hours all the pent-up grief in her nature was poured forth in torrents of anguish; but when the storm had spent itself, the usual surroundings began to make themselves felt and called her back to life.

The thought of her children would bring a sudden flush to her cheeks, when she thought of their return. But she would only have them back when she could meet them with smiles upon her lips and joy in her eyes. The thought of their rosy cheeks and prattling voices did more than give her courage to live; it gave

her the desire to live and an interest in all that concerned them ; so that her heart beat wildly at the hope of soon seeing them, although they would remind her yet more vividly of the man she loved. After the first paroxysm of grief was over, she would stand for hours at the window, gazing in front of her, as far as her eyes could see. There were days in October when the weather struggled between sunshine and rain, and when a kind of spell seemed to hold the senses numbed. Large mouse-grey clouds hung heavy overhead ; here and there a patch of blue sky would break through the thick clouds ; but so pale was the sky that it soon blended with the background. The long curtains of poplar trees were drawn against the horizon ; and through the outline of the stems appeared the river, shining like fragments of a broken mirror. The houses scattered here and there isolated, or in groups of three or four, harmonized with the landscape. The colour of their roofs varied from a deep maroon to a dirty grey—all was alike in that little village, in which even the peasants' clothes were in harmony with its surroundings. Nature is a song without words to which Lucienne listened during long hours of contemplation. She felt herself part of nature ; and her silent hours of beatitude were those in which she regained strength to live, and faith in beauty and happiness.

The villagers each day wondered why Madame Darlot had returned to Crespy-le-Bourg to shut herself up.

"She might just as well have remained in her family."

"Humph ! who knows if her family wants her?" had remarked the postman's wife to the old pew-opener.

"It is my opinion," said Louise in a mysterious tone, "that she is ashamed of herself."

"Such as she have no shame." This from the old woman who drove the worm-eaten coach, as she whipped up the old mare.

The Mayoress had often glanced into the Farm, as she went up to Church, or to pay a call on the Curé.

Her little inquisitive eyes had searched for the woman whom she longed to see. No doubt it was the curiosity of an idle woman whose mind was perpetually feeding on trifles and gossips; but it was also the excitement which the heroine of a tragedy creates in the female sex; and which explains the prestige which surrounds actors and actresses. The woman for whom two men had fought—one of whom had been killed—was not a person to be despised! She might be dangerous as a companion, but she was the forbidden fruit, as the book that has to be read secretly; the person which inflames the imagination of women, and arouses the passions of men.

The Mayor had suggested that he should go and see Madame Darlot; but his wife had scouted the suggestion, although she was desperately curious as to the young widow's future plans.

"Wait until Monsieur le Curé has been to see her. It is his place to go and sympathize with her; that is the correct thing. You must not forget that we are the principal people here—after the Château—and that we cannot commit ourselves without endangering our position. Besides, she has made herself notorious here—and you cannot afford to be talked of in connection with her." The Mayor had agreed. The idea that he might bring upon himself the censure of the village alarmed him; whilst at the same time the notion that his name could ever be coupled with that of this attractive syren flattered his vanity, and inclined him to be indulgent towards any views expressed by his wife, who, intelligent woman that she was, seemed to fully recognize how easily he could play the part of the gay deceiver.

One afternoon, Lucienne saw the tall, dark figure of the Priest standing in the doorway, awkwardly twisting his hat round and round in his hands.

"How do you do, Monsieur le Curé? Come in; the children only came back yesterday."

"Yes, Madame; I saw them playing from my windows. They look very well." He stood in the middle of the room, looking at the carpet.

"Will you not sit down?" she asked, sitting down and pointing to a chair.

A silence followed, which was oppressive to the Curé, and which brought to Lucienne's mind the occasion on which she had appealed to his manly courage, and had been met by an unsexed ecclesiastic.

She was the first to break the pause by asking him some trifling questions about the villagers, the vintage; to which he replied at length, sparing her no details about the hopes and possibilities of a prosperous year. As he lost himself in his prosy talk he forgot his shyness, and having exhausted his subject he finally asked her.

"And do you mean to remain here, Madame?"

"It is my home, and my children are happy here."

"How will you bear it?"

"I live through the days as they come; I shall bear things as they come."

"Sometimes it would be better to prevent the evils to come, and in that way spare oneself more grief, Madame."

"I do not believe in sparing ourselves griefs; we must face life with all its responsibilities; but I forget that your doctrine is to shun life."

The Curé gave her a covert look full of rancour, and murmured—

"Ah! If one only could arrive at crushing life in our hearts, the struggle would not be so hard!"

"It was the place Jean loved best, and some mysterious link binds me to it. It is something I cannot explain, but which I must obey."

"Do you always obey your first impulse?" he inquired.

"Yes," she answered softly.

"How selfish some people are!" he thought, as he recalled her visit to Laya, which had been the cause of all the disaster. Women were irresponsible beings, who always brought misery to men.

"Ah! Madame, you are not a priest; we cannot give way to our impulses as you can—we are chained!" he exclaimed bitterly.

"One day you may be free ; will you not then take your life in your own hands ?"

"What would you wish me to do ? Very soon, no doubt, we shall be turned out of our office."

"It will be your deliverance," interrupted Lucienne—"your freedom."

"Freedom ! Bah ! We are slaves, and shall remain slaves ; we are too numerous to all find situations as lay tutors."

"Emigrate, then."

"Foreign countries will be overcrowded with the religious orders that have been turned out, and when we are dismissed there will be no room for us anywhere. Besides, I am too old to work—at forty the muscles are stiff ; I have lost the regular habit of manual work. Our clerical training has unfitted us for any physical exertion ; and we are like the Asiatic women brought up for the harem, incapable of facing independence and utterly unable to forget the Church ; we are doomed to live and die with the impress of the Seminary education deeply engraved upon our minds."

"Have you never loved ?"

He looked up at her, a cynical smile parting his thick lips, a red light flashing in his dull brown eyes.

"At the age when passions are unruly, we are warned against them. If we give way to them, we are perfectly aware of what we are doing. The Church is indulgent, and we know that it is but a passing folly."

The silence which followed was painful to Lucienne. She felt the atmosphere heavy, and got up to open the door ; instinctively conscious that the Priest's eyes followed her across the room. When she returned to her seat, she saw him standing, twisting his umbrella in his hands.

"I hardly dare tell you what message I have for you, Madame !"

"Why not ? Please do not mind saying anything to me——"

"I saw the Dowager yesterday——"

"Ah!" interrupted Lucienne, "how is she?"

He looked down slyly at his thick boots.

"She seemed anxious to—see you——"

"I should love to see her!" hurriedly said Lucienne, clasping her hands.

"You!—but you never saw her but once," said the Priest, in a tone of surprise.

"And I have never forgotten the meeting, or the woman——"

"You would go up there?"

"Why not?"

"Because—she—could have helped to clear the calumny—especially as she had been a witness to your flight at the ball."

"She belongs to a world which cannot understand any other point of view but their own," said Lucienne quietly.

"She can only arouse anger in your heart."

"No; there is no anger in my heart, and she attracts me."

"Does the Marquise de Savigny and the Comtesse Hélène attract you?" roughly asked the Priest.

"I do not understand them;" and she looked at him with a profound pity in her eyes. "I have lived so intensely in the present hour, whether happy or unhappy, that many things have remained a sealed letter for me."

"Ah! my dear lady, these people are just the same as their forefathers were in old *régime*. For them, the French Revolution has never been; and they are as light-hearted as they are cruel in their appreciation of those who are outside their immediate circles."

"Still, I should like to see her," continued Lucienne, ignoring the Abbé's remarks. "Did she really express the wish to see me?"

"She said that you might call any day in the afternoon—that she would see you with pleasure." The Priest laughed awkwardly as he spoke, and moved towards the door.

"I shall go to-morrow," said Lucienne firmly as she shook hands with the Curé.

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Gertrude de Savigny, who received her in the dining-room next day, spoke a few words of sympathy. She had expected this visit; and as she could not prevent it, nor dared persuade her Grandmother not to see Lucienne, they had made up their minds to accept it; and Gertrude had determined to see Lucienne first and make a last appeal to the woman who certainly had been wronged, but who was well punished for her pride and obstinacy. She talked of the sad circumstances of Lucienne's life and of Jean's death. The event was cruel; but, were we not all brought into this world to suffer, and was it not expected of us to bear the misfortunes which were sent to us?

"But I forget that you and I do not think alike on that point, Madame," said Gertrude, drawing herself up as if she were ashamed of having given way to a certain amount of emotion. "I forget that you do not seek strength and resignation from a higher power." Lucienne looked up at Gertrude with the expression of a wounded deer. "Humility is our only salvation; we are nobodies—nothing but abject creatures without God's help. He alone is merciful, and is always ready to welcome us back. Let me entreat you to make your peace with God!"

"I do not understand your God, Madame; and your faith cannot be mine. Your words even do not touch me. You speak of humility, self-denial; these things are the contradictions of life. You bring forward death to console me for death. If I thought as you do I would hate my children, my fellow-creatures, the world that was created by God, and even the God who created us all. I need something more than resignation to give me courage."

"I have no doubt you are very brave, Madame," bitterly remarked Gertrude, "and I know you have shown great energy in your grief; but faith would soothe you in your revolt, and would help to bend



your will. Life is made up of sorrows and of cruel partings. We must live with the idea that life is a long trial, and we must not look out for happiness——”

“Ah, Madame,” interrupted Lucienne, “do not say that. It is no consolation to know that others suffer hopelessly even as we do. Let us believe that happiness does exist, and that it is our bounden duty to seek it as long as we have life in our body!”

“Trust to your guardian angel, who will, day by day, lead you through life until you return to God’s bosom.”

“Your guardian angel is a black-winged bird hovering over a bleeding heart. Do not turn death into a blessing, and moral cowardice into a virtue. Is that the only aim of religion—to kill life? I cannot turn against it; it gave me happiness, although it took it away from me. I love life although I suffer. Life is as important to me as my grief is bitter.”

“Ah! Madame, then you are not utterly desperate, if you can speak as you do; and others, no doubt, suffer more than you do. But, I am afraid, it is your pride that keeps up your courage, and I dread the moment when you will be left a prey to all evil passions.”

“Madame la Marquise is waiting for Madame Darlot.” The pompous voice of the butler interrupted the conversation of the two women, who got up; and after Gertrude de Savigny had bowed stiffly to Lucienne, the latter followed the servant along the passage leading to the Dowager’s drawing-room.

The old Marquise watched Lucienne as she crossed the length of the room towards her. She knew her by her walk and the graceful set of her head on her shoulders, although Lucienne appeared very different in the black morning dress from when she was in her white ball dress. The old Marquise, motionless in her arm-chair, stared at the young woman in front of her; she took her hand in her wrinkled fingers without pressing it, and pointed to the chair beside her.

"Have you your children with you, Madame?"

"They came home last week."

"How you must have missed them when you came back alone to the Farm."

"I must not think of all that I miss . . ." Lucienne had a way of pronouncing some words in a poignant tone of voice, which sent a thrill to her listeners' hearts.

"You are much to be pitied," murmured the Dowager in a low voice. "Have you any relations? Any one who can be a moral help to you?"

"I have my husband's relations—the others I do not know," hesitatingly said Lucienne.

"Yes—you are an orphan?"

"My father is dead—that I know for a fact. But you, no doubt, know him by name; he was a great man—Dupont?"

The Dowager looked up at the young woman, and her pursed-up lips murmured, "Pierre?"

"Yes. I remember seeing my father once—I was three years old; my nurse took me to the Chamber of Deputies. He noticed me at the entrance door, and asked my nurse who I was. She answered a few words, and he took me into his arms and kissed me passionately. I have forgotten the words he spoke, but I shall never forget the embrace."

"And your mother?" inquired the Marquise, although she felt it was puerile to put such a question; for Dupont had had many intrigues in his adventurous life.

"I do not know her—nor have I ever heard her name."

"Did your nurse know her?"

"Yes—but she kept to the last her secret."

"And yours," replied the Dowager.

One could hear the rustling of the leaves outside, and the light October wind blew stormily round the Château, whilst the rays of the setting sun cast patches of red gold upon the parquet floor and the furniture in the room. All the past had seemed so far away to Lucienne since Jean's death, she could hardly recall

her childhood ; but here, in this atmosphere of a past world all unknown to her, in the presence of this old lady, heir to many traditions, she began to feel interested in all that hitherto she had ignored of her maternal history ; she felt moved to talk of that unknown past with the Dowager, who had set her at her ease by attacking the subject of her origin with simplicity and directness of purpose.

"You married young?" inquired the Dowager.

"At eighteen."

"But not at Church,"—it was more the stating of a fact than a question.

"And your children were not christened?" she continued.

"No," softly replied Lucienne. "I was brought up without any religion. My husband was also, and my children are as good as their father."

The Dowager found Lucienne much changed. Tears had dimmed the brilliancy of her eyes and pencilled a black line beneath her eyes. The beautifully shaped nose was thinner, and the mouth had acquired that sensitiveness which early grief lends to youthful features. Her movements had entirely lost the awkwardness that Roland de Laya had noticed ; and had now that lassitude which overpowers those who have suddenly been taught life's first lesson in grief, and whose hearts have forgotten the mad joys of the past.

Lucienne looked up and noticed that the old Marquise's eyes were full of tears, and that the wrinkled lips were trembling ; but this moment of emotion was soon over, for the Dowager was well trained, and had the habit of mastering her feelings like a soldier. But although she controlled her outward show of emotion, the silent, though poignant, grief of the young woman had brought back memories of the past, and in a moment of sympathy for another's sorrow, she spoke of what had never passed her lips for half a century.

"My poor child, I have known what you are going through—I have known the grief which is never

cured. When they told me of my husband's death—also in a duel—I was just going to give birth to a child.”

“Ah!” whispered Lucienne, feeling instinctively drawn towards this strange woman. She was no longer the symbol of a past epoch of history—she had become a human being, with all the passions and despair of a true woman. But shyness prevented Lucienne from asking the questions which hung upon her lips, and silence reigned in the old-fashioned room. The wind outside shook the branches of the trees, and the patches of golden light moved about on the furniture as the sun sank towards the horizon. The Marquise was the first to break the silence, and she spoke in a thin monotonous tone of voice, as if she were narrating the list of her misdeeds in the privacy of a confessional.

“What tortured me during these long years was that he died before I could forgive him——”

Lucienne betrayed a movement of curiosity, to which the Dowager replied—

“Yes; he had done me the greatest wrong a man can do to a woman—and a wife; and when I heard of his being killed at the hand of his rival—after the first impression of revolt and despair—I suffered from not having had an opportunity of granting him my forgiveness. It is horrible to feel that nothing can be lived over again, and that the inevitable separates for ever those who could perhaps in time have come to understand one another.”

“Ah! . . .” impulsively exclaimed Lucienne, “there never was that difficulty between us——” She stopped, conscious that her words might have wounded the Dowager. And then she remembered that every one in the Château had accepted the calumny under which she laboured as a fact. “No,” she hurriedly said. “What you think—was cleared between us. He knew me—and knew there had been a frightful mistake—and he died convinced of my love.”

“He was right to believe in you.”

The Dowager looked at the young woman with the

timid, pleading look of a child who appeals to an elder for forgiveness.

"But you have your children to console you for all that has happened. I have lost all mine." And she gripped convulsively the arms of her fauteuil.

"All!" and Lucienne bent forward. "The child who was born at that sad time?"

"No—she lived—that is the saddest part of it; all that I suffered—the bad state of health I was in—the revolt I went through at the time of my confinement—were cruel conditions for a child to be born under."

"She lives?" timidly inquired Lucienne.

"Yes—but I have not seen her for three years. I was perhaps wrong. I misunderstood her nature. Ah! my poor child, if only we could live apart from Party factions, and ignore that political animosity which for ever divides the members of our family!"

"I do not understand, Madame. How can political rancour separate those who love each other?"

"My child, may you remain ignorant of all these terrible conflicts. You are, happily for yourself, outside of these social wranglings——"

"But why should one hate?"

"Ah! child, the time of peace and concord is gone for ever; and since the great Revolution, France has been struggling between good and evil passions. Men like my father, the Marshal, are rare; and our party has lost its ideals. Every great and noble idea is vanishing; religion, military glory have been trampled upon; whilst those who bear the greatest names in France, unable to live up to their glorious past, lose in their spurious search for pleasures those fine qualities which particularized our nation once, so prompt to help the weak, and so ready of old to be the champion of honour."

The monotonous voice of the Dowager had a peculiar charm for Lucienne, who for the first time was being made to understand, by this relic of a great past, the *état d'âme* of a whole society of which she

had hitherto never dreamed. It was like an historical panorama passing in front of her eyes. It was vividly true, although lacking the pulsation of life; and she could not help sorrowing for this old woman who had lost all interest in the present.

The dowager had recovered from her emotion, and as was her wont, she had drifted from personalities to general ideas. For years she had cultivated the habit of intellectual pursuits; and her advanced old age had dulled the power of acute feeling, which indeed, very rarely showed itself outwardly in this strictly disciplined character. The young woman felt instinctively that the Marquise would not refer again to the confidence she had made—at any rate not on this occasion—and her hostess had once more become the symbol of an old epoch never to be revived; whilst the tortured heart which had bled inwardly from its wounds was again sealed up in the last representative of a race who had invariably sacrificed emotions to ideals. Lucienne realized what that past must have been, and what a poor part the present descendants of that race were playing in the drama of political life; offering to the world the spectacle of another decadence like the one she had lately witnessed in the Priest who had lost all faith in life, and all hope in another world. The old societies, with their impracticable codes of honour and blind prejudices were dying out; on the other side, the feeble wailing of a new-born world was hardly yet suggestive of what it would become in the future when intolerance, hatred, narrow-mindedness had vanished from our future societies. The modern world was too crude, too young; whilst the old *régime* was too obstinate in its wilful ignorance and too degenerate to learn new lessons; and both societies knew no other means to their end but hatred.

The sun was setting behind the horizon, the wind had dropped, and the patches of golden light had disappeared from the walls and furniture, when Lucienne stood up to say good-bye to the Dowager.

"You will come again, Madame. This hour is my best for receiving visitors—come whenever you like." She held Lucienne's hand within her small fingers, and for an instant the young woman felt that the Marquise had something to say, for her lips moved; but the hand relaxed its pressure, and the lips closed firmly over the even set of false teeth.

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## CHAPTER XVIII

It was the season when long December evenings were drawing the peasants away from the fields into the houses, and when young and old gathered round the table to shell the nuts before preparing them to make nut oil. From behind the closed doors and windows, laughter sounded gaily like silver bells in young throats, and love sprung up in tender hearts under the influence of home life and long cosy chats; whilst smiles of satisfaction heightened the wrinkled features of the older generations, who saw looming in the near future the visions of grandchildren.

The weekly gatherings at the village inn relieved the monotony of winter days; and the clatter of wooden shoes down the village street of a Saturday night was a sure sign that the habitual entertainments had been resumed. On these occasions the festivities broke up late, and it would be nearly midnight before the parties of peasants set out for their homes through the silent night, and sometimes through the roads white with fresh fallen snow.

The innkeeper added to his office those of verger, grave-digger, bell-ringer and wine-grower; and he brought into each of these functions the good temper of the peasant of Touraine who accepts all the eventualities of life with a Rabelaisian philosophy. He

would sit with the villagers in the billiard-room, and as they drank white wine and watched the cannoning of balls, he would recall for the hundredth time his weird adventures as grave-digger, whilst his story would be broken in upon by boisterous laughter, and the scraping of old Finot's violin from the next room.

The Curé would sometimes look in and drink a glass of Vouvray, listening meanwhile to the old men's gossip and adding his word of scandal.

"Well, Monsieur le Curé, you still count Madame Lucienne amongst your parishioners," said old Louvier one evening as he stood leaning on his knobby stick, and watching the young men play billiards.

"Well, well," laughed the Mayor, who smoked his pipe. "Beauty cannot weep for ever, doubtless there is some lover in a corner."

"You may be certain that if she stays here she's got some good reason for it," exclaimed the blacksmith, bringing down his fist on the table and making all the glasses clatter.

"Yes, you be sure that she has made Paris too hot to hold her," remarked the innkeeper's wife, who came to take away the dirty glasses and rubbed the table with her apron.

"After all," and the Curé shrugged his shoulders, "I know no more about her than you do—women are strange."

"Yes, she had much better return to her relations—better for her children," roughly spoke the blacksmith.

"She is always going up to the Château now." The innkeeper's wife laid down some clean glasses on the table.

"When the cat's away the mice will play," remarked the Mayor.

"The devil only knows what mischief she is making up there," retorted Louvier, striking the stone floor with his stick. "My grandson, the footman, says she stays hours with the old woman reading—now, what can she read to an old dotty of ninety-three?"

"Louvier, you are as cute as ever," and the Mayor



laid his hand on the old man's shoulder. "You have not forgotten the artist's trying to humbug you?"

"No, and I should like to have ten minutes with that hussy."

"Ah! the poor old woman—I know what it is." The verger's wife was standing close to the table, with her hands on her hips. "There's my grandmother, now, she is like a child—does anything that one wishes; and one day she was going to give up her keys to that scoundrel of a nephew, for him to take all her savings—why, Emile just came in as the rascal was opening the drawer. Ah! and you should have heard the yells she set up; she would not hear of Emile sending the wretch out of the place."

"She is quite capable of stealing things when she is alone with the Dowager," broke in the blacksmith.

"Surely, a woman of ninety-three does not belong to this world any longer!" said the verger, filling up a cigarette.

"Ah! it would be better to be in the other world, seeing the misery we all have in this one," said old Louvier.

"And to think that there is a God who allows such villains to exist—for, what other reasons can that woman have in going to the Château, but some mischief!" said Madame Emile.

"Ah! but there was Jesus Christ, Who said we had to forgive our enemies," ironically said the Mayor, leaning back against the wall, his thumbs in his arm-holes.

"Bah! one can't always do what is written in the books," grumbled Emile's wife, raising the wick of a smoky lamp.

"Yes," and the blacksmith emptied a tumbler of white wine. "It's difficult enough to live decently and to earn one's livelihood now-a-days."

"That's why you tell us that it's all in the other world that we shall be happy, hey! Monsieur le Curé?" Emile's wife was always cheeky with the Abbé Martin, for whom she had a profound contempt,

and whose conduct towards his mother aroused her indignation.

"Ah! Madame Emile," replied the Priest, "the other world is a good way off."

"Well, I say that religion is good for the rich—and the idle!" and the blacksmith's fist came down with a bang on the table.

All laughed noisily, and the men clinked their glasses; the atmosphere was heavy with clouds of tobacco-smoke and the smell of perspiration which came from the peasants' clothes.

Madame Emile wiped her shiny face with her apron.

"Ah! well, they are making enough row next door," she exclaimed as the noise of thick boots on the parquet floor became more deafening. "You hear them dance and laugh over there," she continued, pitching her shrill voice as high as she could to be heard by the men, "but you don't know what it is to bring up children—the clothes—the food—the education—and the illnesses! Ah! *mon Dieu! mon Dieu!* Life is sad; you are all alike, you men—you see only the beauty in a woman; for a pretty one that makes eyes at you you would risk your necks; but when she has given you all that you wanted out of her, off you go! If it was not for the children *we* would not marry—for all the pleasure *we* have! Marriage is not worth all the trouble: all work—some play in the beginning; but, *mon Dieu!* it does not last long; the man soon begins to gallivant, he goes out for his piggishness—and returns drunk and tired out. Ah! they may well laugh and kick their heels—they will soon sing another tune when their man kicks them instead of kissing them, and leaves them to run after other petticoats!" The men laughed boisterously; it was always the same harangue, and they listened to her abuse of men with the same jovial philosophy with which they heard her husband's grim experiences as a grave-digger.

The villagers were not alone in criticizing Lucienne's motives for remaining in Crespy and going to see the Dowager. At first Edmond de Savigny and Gaston

de Laumel had joked about their Grandmother's new craze.

"It is one of her intellectual hobbies," Gaston had remarked. "We have had every kind of fad—and she has treated us to Tolstoi dinners, Kropotkin breakfasts, and Herbert Spencer afternoons. My Grandmother is the most intellectually inquisitive woman I have known; had she been of a passionate temperament, society would have heard of her pranks."

"Good God!" exclaimed Edmond, "we have had enough of that with Aunt Valérie! But, all the same, our Grandmother remains a staunch Royalist, notwithstanding her Socialistic mania; and with all her unorthodox theories she is a fervent Catholic."

"Yes," lazily concluded Gaston, "she is, besides which—she's too old to put any of her subversive doctrines into practice."

They all kept out of her way when Lucienne came to the Château. Gertrude and Hélène managed to be in their own boudoirs at the time when she generally called; and Edmond was out of doors enjoying the last rays of an autumn sun. Once or twice Gaston had been reading in his grandmother's drawing-room when Madame Darlot had been announced; he had risen, and bowing to her with a mocking twinkle in his eyes, he had left the room. He did not bear any grudge against the woman who had repulsed his advances; he was far too light-hearted and indolent to be vindictive—and in the cold cinders of his one-week-old passion there was only a little distrust of that lovely woman who could meet him again without showing any shyness or emotion. But, to a well-bred man of the world there are as many shades of politeness as there are degrees of love-making; and the bow of a man to a woman of unsullied reputation is subtly different from that of a man to a woman who had been—justly or unjustly—compromised in the eyes of society. To his exclusive and prejudiced turn of mind it seemed impossible that a woman in her station of life should be self-possessed. Her assurance annoyed him, as it proved how little

impression he had made upon her ; and he felt more inclined to believe in the scandal of the Diane room, notwithstanding the facts of the forged letter.

"Bah ! How do we know that Marie sent that letter to Laya ? a mere coincidence perhaps !" Gaston had remarked one day.

"And then," Gertrude had rejoined, "however bad Marie may be, is it likely that such a thorough woman of the world would commit a forgery ?"

Public opinion at the Château veered from one opinion to the opposite according to small events. They had been disposed to accept the hypothesis of Marie's forged letter, as long as Lucienne remained away from Crespy, and they felt quite inclined to believe in her innocence ; but when she returned to the Farm, and especially when they observed her intimacy with the Dowager grow closer, they began to regard her with suspicion. A woman callous enough to meet dispassionately the people who had acted a part in the tragedy in which her husband had lost his life, they could believe capable of any misdeed.

"You will never make me believe," Gertrude asserted one day at breakfast, "that if that woman had loved her husband, she could ever bear to set eyes on any of us again !"

"Only a vulgar intriguer could act thus, and shamelessly persist in coming here," was the retort of the Comtesse Hélène.

Towards the end of October the two couples had left Crespy. Their regret was very great, not at leaving the country, but at having to leave the Dowager alone and unprotected. But Edmond had to go to Lorraine to join his mother, who never left Nancy ; and Gaston was obliged to be in his property in Normandy by the beginning of November, so they could not postpone their departure, however anxious they felt at the idea of leaving their Grandmother in the clutches of Lucienne. Doctor Besnard had declared that the Marquise could not travel to Paris this winter. Although she was wonderfully strong at her age it was too great a risk ; and with her faithful maid Félicie,

and a few old friends who came to see her from Tours and Blois, she would be well looked after and feel comfortable. The old Marquise cheerfully acquiesced in this verdict; she loved Crespy more and more every day, even the walls spoke to her of a happy past; and although her Paris life had been brilliant and interesting, still it was for these past joys that her old heart throbbed, and upon which her aged eyes dwelt with lingering glances.

When the cold November days began, the Dowager took up her winter quarters; and her easy-chair and little Empire table, covered with books, were placed close to the chimney, in which large wood fires blazed cheerfully all day. Here the old Marquise awaited Lucienne's visits, which had become a regular institution. Lucienne would read aloud on two or three afternoons a week from some of the Dowager's favourite authors, or they would talk until darkness threw its shadows upon the room, and the servant came in with the lamps, to shut the shutters and draw the curtains. Then the reading would be resumed, and the Dowager, her hands on her knees, the body bending slightly forward, would listen eagerly to the deep melodious voice of the young woman opposite to her.

One morning the old Marquise woke more fretful than usual, and told her maid to go and ask Madame Darlot if she would come up that afternoon early. It was not her day for calling, but the Dowager seemed anxious to see her; and when Lucienne came into the drawing-room she found her more agitated than was her wont.

"My dear child, I wished to see you; sit down—close to me."

Lucienne sat down and looked at the little table, expecting to see some new book.

"No—no reading to-day." The old woman's hand beat time nervously on the arm of her easy-chair.

"Has something worried you?" inquired Lucienne, bending tenderly towards the Dowager. The latter hesitated before replying; her thin lips were parted, and she inhaled the pungent smell of dead leaves

which Lucienne had trampled under-foot and which still clung to her skirts. The Dowager, who never went out in this cold season, felt the influence of the frosty air which had touched the hair and face of this young and healthy creature.

"Last night I saw and talked with my father," she said at last. "These are the happiest hours of my life—when I hear the voice of the bravest man that ever existed, and look upon the noblest face a man ever had." There was a silence. Lucienne was timid, and dare not question, lest she might wound some deep sentiment or ruffle her susceptibilities. Already she had learned from the old lady the past history of a France of which hitherto she had been ignorant, and been made to admire actions which, although they now seemed impracticable, had still been useful and noble at a time when they were performed in all sincerity. But notwithstanding the growing intimacy between them, Lucienne still considered the Dowager as a kind of impersonal being, who embodied in herself a whole epoch of history and of society of which the younger woman knew nothing.

"I feel myself again a little girl with my father," the feeble voice of the old Marquise resumed, "and the obedience he taught me in my childhood comes back to me whenever I feel his presence." At a look of inquiry from Lucienne, the Marquise continued, "You had no parents, but you have children; and you will learn what discipline means when you teach them their duty."

"Is not love better than obedience?"

"My dear child, there are implacable rules of life for those who are in certain positions. My father was one of those privileged beings whose life served as a light-house to those who were in danger of foundering on the rocks of dishonour. How often had he rescued faint-hearted men who were on the brink of dishonour, or who were the prey of uncontrollable passions, and whom he saved by instilling into them the love of honour and of duty accomplished—even at the loss of life and happiness."

"Cannot happiness and honour be combined?" murmured Lucienne.

"Rarely; and in a conflict between the two, the first must be sacrificed to the second," replied the Marquise, with decision. "My father told me last night where my duty lay"—the voice was harsh and the words sounded abrupt. "I know who wrote the letter to Monsieur de Laya."

Lucienne looked up, and her heart ached at seeing the expression of torture upon the aged features. It seemed so far away, that incident; the great blow of Jean's death had dulled her memory of other wrongs; and the immense grief which filled her heart had obliterated all desire of vengeance.

"My child," added the Marquise, mistaking Lucienne's silence for a sullen disapproval, "I have the proofs here whenever you wish to have them."

"Would you give them to me?" Leaning forward, Lucienne laid her hand on the arm of the fauteuil.

"Here, in my reticule." The Marquise opened her bag with restless fingers and brought out a bundle of papers. "What I am doing now will be severely blamed by my grandchildren. I should not have done it a week ago; I believed then, and I still believe, in the solidarity which keeps the members of one family closely linked together; but my father has spoken, and it is my sense of duty to him that makes me act thus."

Lucienne took out the torn bits of papers, and put them together.

"Yes, here is a letter I wrote to Madame de Savigny; she must have copied my handwriting from it"—the blood mounted to her cheeks—"in what terms she wrote to fix the rendezvous."

After having carefully examined the papers, she folded them again, tied the bundle with the tape, and, getting up, she went to the fire-place and threw the whole into the blazing fire; the corners of the papers curled up, and a few words were clearly visible for a few seconds; then nothing remained but a few blackened fragments.

"What are you doing?" peevishly exclaimed the Dowager, her small hands nervously clutching the arms of the chair. She showed that irascibility which seizes old people when some unforeseen action thwarts their designs or upsets the order of their thoughts.

"Have you already forgotten?"

"No; my love for my husband is as deeply rooted in my heart as it was when he left me; nothing could make me forget him."

"How can you at the same time love him and yet not wish to clear your good name—to punish the culprit who ruined your life? It seems inconsistent with your appeal. . . ." The Dowager hesitated.

"To Monsieur de Laya," quickly replied Lucienne; "it was then our happiness that I defended; but now, what matters? it would only be a useless reprisal on my part to take any further action."

"What! the clearing of your honour—in the eyes of the world——"

"Is nothing to me!" interrupted Lucienne.

"And your children's honour! is that nothing to you? What will you answer to their reproaches?"

"The honour of my children lies in their own conduct, and not in what my actions may have been, however reprehensible the world may think them."

"But do you not suffer from the cruel injustice that was done to you by Madame de Cardaillan?"

"To suffer is not to hate."

"Do you not hate the man who took the life of the one you loved? I can never mention even the name of the man who killed Monsieur de Savigny." The Dowager's lips were contracted, and her complexion had turned from a sallow white to yellow—that blush of very aged people, whose blood does not circulate fast enough to rise to their face.

Was it deep emotion that kept Lucienne silent and motionless; or was it the effort to truly analyze her feelings which held her speechless? She had suffered



inexpressibly ; her heart had been torn to shreds ; still she had lived through the agony of despair. Life had a claim over her, and her splendid health had saved her body, as her mental equipoise had preserved her mind from total collapse. She belonged to life ; and the different phases through which she had passed since her childhood were so many stages by which she would finally reach the complete consciousness of life.

"We suffer under immutable laws that govern the universe—still we do not hate the laws. Nature strikes our loved ones with cruel blows ; the sea has claimed more victims than human injustice—still we love nature, and our love for her is a solace for the wounds she so constantly inflicts on us——"

"Human beings are not laws of nature—they are free to work either good or evil," replied the Dowager.

"Nature made them free, but in the world they are but instruments. Is the soldier free, whom you compel to obey the law of conscription which teaches him a rule of conduct very often in total contradiction to the dictates of his own conscience ?" inquired Lucienne.

"It is a duty to one's country to obey the high codes of honour," retorted the Marquise.

"So is the man obliged to bow down before the discipline of society, however much his soul may be in conflict with the cruel tenets of his world ?"

"Were it otherwise, my dear child, chaos would be the result of a state in which man was the sole judge of right and wrong." The voice of the Dowager was rising to a high pitch of shrillness.

"Why hate the man who is behaving in accordance with the laws which society has enacted for him ? If he is performing a duty, why should we repay him with loathing ?"

"But when his conforming to society's codes of honour means disaster to our personal affections——"

"Then we can pity !" softly interrupted Lucienne.

"Do you hate your God for the loss of all those you loved?"

"He gave us life—He has the right to take it away. He rewards us or punishes us as He chooses, and we cannot evade His justice—do what we may. He has scourged Monsieur de Laya ever since; his divorce—his shattered health—these are the penalties which he has had to pay for his unscrupulous conduct."

"Ah! to cause grief is cruel enough in itself; why should one be punished for it, or suffer?" exclaimed Lucienne, hiding her face in her hands. "To know that that man suffers does not give me any satisfaction. I hate suffering; all my physical and mental nature rebels against it. Even when I writhe under the agony of despair, I try to convince myself that happiness exists as a positive fact; just as, when a child, I used to soothe my anguish when going through a tunnel in a train, by repeating to myself that daylight would re-appear at the end."

The Dowager's scrutinizing eyes tried to find in Lucienne's countenance the secret of this enigmatical nature. She had gone through all her trials with the conviction that she must live according to the precepts of her ancestors, and in conformance with the rules of society which kept one constantly in training. Her disquisitions on moral problems were purely intellectual; and although she read the Gospels every Sunday, and studied deeply all the philosophers and sociologists of past and present times, she never brought her studies to bear on her personal conduct, nor on her relations with the outer world.

In reality the French are too classical to follow the precepts of the Galilean. Their æsthetic love of beauty, and the cult of intellectual supremacy, together with their belief in logical reasoning, must ever be in conflict with the idea of the humble artisan; and had there not been instituted an authoritative and anthropomorphic Church to interpret the Christian doctrine, there is little doubt but that the Teacher of love and humility would have failed in his mission to the autocratic heads of Governments. The Latin races

are true pagans still ; and clericalism has only thrown a shroud of morose religiosity over their societies, and doomed them to contradiction and to retrospective recriminations. It metamorphosed the healthy optimism of Montaigne into a morbid contempt for life. That eclectic French race, so essentially speculative, is nobly disdainful of all actions, and thirsts for self-analysis alone ; assuming an attitude of mental aloofness from whence it faintly observes the outlines of social and political events. Therein lies the great mistake of the French. They submit to the building up of modern institutions to some obsolete tradition ; and revive old legends that do not suit the claims of present societies ; forgetting that legends are but epitaphs on the tombstones of history, and that to read them as lessons for the future is to turn the present into a mausoleum.

French people are the nation of all nations who do the most harm to themselves ; their superficiality brings no relief to their power of introspection ; nor is their outward love for pleasure a relaxation to their inner sadness ; and how seldom does their strong aptitude for logical reasoning control their outbursts of unruly passions ! Deceptive French frolic ! that leads the desultory observer to ignore the fact that under the frock-coat or the lace mask often gnaws the canker of despair ; and that the clinking of champagne glasses only for a time muffles the spasms of death hiccough !

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## CHAPTER XIX

WHEN Lucienne left the Dowager that day, the latter remained lost in wonder. That a woman should refuse to rehabilitate her reputation when she had the means to do so, seemed an anomaly

to her notions of honour and justice. She felt she had done her duty in fulfilling her father's commands; but in her inmost heart she was relieved to know that, owing to Lucienne's generosity, a scandal would be averted; for Marie de Cardaillan, whatever she had been and had done, belonged to that world towards which the eye of democracy is ever directed in search of flaws in the morality of the higher classes. Marie had certainly broken many of the moral laws of Church and society; but she had not offended against the codes of a world who placed political honour above all private morality. Marie de Cardaillan had never chosen her lovers anywhere else but amongst men of fashion, nor had she ever scandalized her *milieu* by any incursions into a doubtful set. Whereupon her world felt that she was entitled to a certain degree of indulgence, and that which had been denied to Valérie de Vallorbes—the aunt Valérie who had sinned more against society than against God—was accorded to Marie.

But although the Dowager behaved strictly in accordance with the rules of her world she placed even higher than these her duty of obedience to her father; and she claimed for herself the right of choosing her mental amusements wherever she list. Lucienne's character had made a great impression on her; not that she lost, through contact with her, any of her prejudices, nor approved entirely of the young woman's conduct and views; but her mind was invariably athirst for intellectual problems, and she studied this human document as she had studied so many others belonging to the socialistic and philosophical order. Lucienne caused her to reflect upon history; and this living enigma which was in direct contradiction with all her notions of social morality, made her launch out into unlimited reflections upon historical evolution. She realized that future societies would fulfil the anticipations of the eighteenth century; and that science would perchance solve the philosophical problems of an era which dreamed of a return to Nature, not merely from a physical point of view,

but from a moral and social standpoint. Such a state of things could, she believed, only come to pass when the old forms of societies had vanished, and a new conception of human aggregations been initiated, with the result of establishing new and different relations between human beings and the sexes. She knew to her fingers' tips the eighteenth century, and had read all its correspondences—amorous and philosophical; she had lived through the nineteenth century, and seen all its contradictory aspirations; she had shared the vindictive passions of the Restoration Governments, and had lived amongst the chiefs of the political opposition under the reign of Napoleon the Third; and now she philosophized in her chimney corner on the nature of this young woman who seemed unconsciously to sum up in herself the epoch of which Rousseau was the apostle; and to unwittingly continue the doctrine of "be true to yourself," which George Sand had preached, more even by her own example than by her literary creations.

The Marquise judged her own epoch with the same sense of detachment as was inspired by her immediate surroundings; Gertrude de Savigny for instance, whom she esteemed for her devout sentiments and correct behaviour, she deemed intolerable for the narrowness of her intellect, and for her stiff provincial manners. Hélène de Laumel was, in her eyes, the type of most modern young women, whom she judged to be lacking in manners, and to resemble in appearance their own maids. As to the men of her *milieu*—what she called young men—from thirty to forty—she judged them from her grandsons' characters. Gaston was the type of the man haunted by the vision of a political future so antagonistic to his convictions and tastes that he kept aloof from all political actions. He feared social upheavals and preferred to have no part in the building up of a modern France. Her other grandson, Edmond, was pursued by the memory of a past France which he was intelligent enough to know could never be revived, but for which he nourished morbid regrets. His grandmother had vainly endea-

voured to arouse in him the sacred fire of patriotism and of indignation for what was going on in their poor country ; and had urged him to take up politics either as a militant representative of the party which defended the Church and the throne, or as a writer ; but Edmond was much more preoccupied with what his father would have thought of his capacities, than of the services which he might render to his country and party. Like the majority of his countrymen, he attached great importance to criticism, and to what his *milieu* would think of him ; and unable to face public life owing to a timorous nature, he refused to present himself to a constituency or to support his party with his pen in the reviews and daily papers. He often drove the Dowager into one of her violent harangues against the pusillanimity of their party. Gaston had christened one of these convulsions the "Defoe night," for the story of Robinson Crusoe had been the cause of a hot argument over the Latin and Anglo-Saxon races ; the old Marquise asserted that no Frenchman could have been taken as a model for the patient, analytic Robinson ; for, had he belonged to that sympathetic race, he would—on his meeting with Friday—have at once inquired of him what he thought of man's attitude towards nature and civilization, and would have asked him to write a treatise on primitive life and complexity of life in cities.

The inaction of these two men : the one from fear of the future, the other from a morbid recollection of a past which undermined his fortitude, was to the Dowager's mind symbolical of a party which had given up all their claims to active opposition, and which preferred to indulge in mere recriminations whilst they gave themselves up to the enjoyment of the spurious pleasures of life.

Towards the beginning of February the Dowager began to receive visits from some of her old friends in Tours and Blois ; and, scrupulous in all her social duties, she now and then asked an old friend to come and stay a day or two at Crespy.

The Comtesse de Blangy was expected one afternoon ; and the yellow room, usually given to guests who remained a few days, had been prepared. The Comtesse thought it her duty to visit the living symbol of monarchical glory ; and she accomplished this journey as a pilgrimage, no doubt, but also with a view to disburdening her grievances to a sympathetic heart ; and relating all the gossip of Tours, all the witty sallies of the Archbishop, and more specially the malicious remarks of his secretary ; for the Archbishop, although a high dignitary of the Church, was inclined towards liberalism, and the best society in Touraine feared his tendency towards tolerance.

On the arrival of the closed landau—for the Comtesse came from Tours in her own carriage, and hardly ever entered a railway station—the footmen came forward to help the old lady down. She gathered up her trailing garments in both hands and followed the butler through the hall to the drawing-room, in which the Marquise was seated reading Herbert Spencer's *Modern Ethics*. At the entrance of her old friend she laid the book down, and scrutinized the face of the cheerful old lady who walked fussily across the room. There was about twenty years difference between their ages ; and the expression on the Comtesse de Blangy's features was one of satisfaction at being in possession of her bodily activity, which enabled her to take part in all the charity organizations and worldly entertainments so dear to her heart. She noticed that the Dowager looked older than the last time she had seen her ; but her pilgrimage was to the shrine of a glorious past of France, not to the altar of a mortal representative of modern France.

She sank into one of the large easy-chairs, and began to talk on many unimportant subjects before she broached the one for which she had specially come to see the Dowager. The two women were very different from one another in appearance. Not only could one see from her toilette that the Comtesse was very wealthy, but one could easily guess from her pomposity that wealth was, and had been, one of her principal

preoccupations through life, and that she loved to parade it amongst the great. Her voice was sweet, but her expression was, at times, cold and hard, and her sentences often cutting and contemptuous.

Unconsciously the conversation drifted from the most insignificant remarks to the vital question which made every good Catholic's heart throb.

"We are living through the persecutions of the early Christians over again," remarked the Dowager.

"Ah! dear Marquise, we must be prepared for anything. It will soon be the turn of our Priests. There is no freedom in our poor country; and we are not allowed to think as we like, or to bring up our children as we wish."

She took from her reticule the newspaper of the *Légitimité*, one of the fiercest of Royalist dailies in Touraine, and began to read some of the news. She related the progress of the Christian League of which she was President. All the best society belonged to the League, and every one willing to help; whilst all means, fair and unfair, were considered excusable and even desirable to adopt, as a means of ascertaining the thoughts and convictions of the lower classes. The world was now divided into two distinct classes: the evil-minded and the right-minded. The power for good must necessarily counter-balance the power of evil. The Comtesse read out the names of half-a-dozen adherents to the good cause, which did honour to the powers of energetic proselytism of the other members. She went on enumerating the names of those whom the society had run to earth: two tradesmen had been compelled to leave Tours and to seek work elsewhere, owing to the activity of the secret organization.

"And, dear Marquise, we have a suicide to record;—an unfortunate man—a grocer, whose commerce entirely depended on the best houses in Tours. Naturally his business suffered from his persistent refusal to go to Church; at last we all determined to taboo him and never purchase the smallest article in his shop. It is very terrible to think that this



confirmed atheist preferred the eternal fire of hell to the joys of heaven."

"And to your custom," sharply retorted the Marquise. "It is not by extermination that you will bring back your vagrant sheep to better sentiments."

"It will always be one less in the world; and with patience and energy we shall purge the world of all the poison of free-thinking. This suicide only proves how perverse the man was; and we should all rejoice at his disappearance."

The two women looked at each other in silence; the expression of the Comtesse was radiant at the vision of a world in which there would exist no one who differed from her opinions. The Dowager gazed at her with her penetrating eyes, which looked beyond personal interests and only contemplated general ideas. She judged the Comtesse to be a narrow-minded woman, prejudiced and lacking in the philosophical sense of life, who, having tasted blood, would never be stopped on her proselytizing career.

"We rely on you, dear Marquise," Madame de Blangy continued, "and the Committee has asked me to approach you and to beg of you to bring back to saner views a person who has been—and is the scandal of our county."

She leaned forward in a persuasive attitude towards the Dowager, whom she knew to be slightly inclined towards ideas of the eighteenth century. The latter did not understand at first, but she pursed up her thin lips at the mere notion of any one trying to interfere with her independence of thought.

"You know whom I mean? Madame Darlot, who is the talk of all the neighbourhood!"

"So many are the talk of the neighbourhood," replied the Marquise, not sorry to tease her unintellectual friend.

"But she is not only the talk of every one, but a shameful example. Her children are not christened; and in Tours every one says that she pushed her husband into that duel for her wicked ends."

"Ah! So that is what you say in Tours? I am

sorry for you, then." The Dowager's eyes shot angry looks at the Comtesse. "*I* know her, and I can tell you she is no more what you all believe, than you are an accomplice of the Government in the closing of convents."

"It is just because we are aware that you know her, that I am here to implore of you to influence her either to leave the country or to enter the bosom of the Church."

"I do not belong to the League, my dear Comtesse," sharply replied the Dowager; "besides, I do not believe in forcing the human mind to think as you wish. When you have to deal with weak minds, persecution unhinges their mental powers, as it did with your grocer; when the mind is more robust, your fanaticism acts upon it as a stimulant. I admire sincerity."

"You mean anarchy." The Comtesse closed her eyelids as if to banish such a view of human depravity.

"I do not object to independence in a person whose mind is of a superior quality; it interests me."

The Comtesse gave a deep sigh.

"Even were I to consent to talk to her, I should not know how to do it. Her character commands a certain amount of respect."

"Respect!" exclaimed Madame Blangy, lifting her eyelids and fixing her clear blue eyes on the Dowager's face. "A woman who is not married, who never enters a Church, whose relations with M. de Laya has been the scandal of our county. Ah! dear Marquise, your tolerance is culpable!"

"The scandal is false!" began the Dowager impetuously. But she continued in a softer tone: "As to her irreligion, I grieve over that, and must only trust that God will touch her with His divine grace. Religion is a discipline we all need."

"Have you heard that M. de Laya has returned to Limeray? It is a scandal! Of course no one can approve of his wife's conduct; but I am afraid we shall very soon hear worse things, for, no doubt,

M. de Laya's motive for returning to Touraine must be to find that person."

"What does every one say of Madame de Cardailan?" shrilly inquired the Dowager.

"Oh! there is nothing more to be said about her," unctuously replied the Comtesse, folding her hands on her lap and regarding her hostess with a pious air. "The Marquise is very witty—she is too light a woman to be deeply wicked; and moreover she regularly attends the Church services, I am told."

There was a deep silence, in which the crackling of the logs was heard.

The Comtesse was not indifferent to ease and comfort, and her eyelids dropped over her pupils like those of a cat purring in the chimney corner, and she passed her tongue over her lips in perfect contentment.

"Dear Marquise, you alone could effect the miracle of bringing back that person into the right path," she returned to the attack.

"She has Christian feelings which often astonish me," said the Marquise, her hands fidgiting with the folds of her old cashmere skirt.

"What?" The Comtesse woke from her torpor and raised her eyelids. "And then she is a bastard?" and her tone was scornful; "her father, Pierre Dupont, was an anarchist! her mother," she hesitated, "no doubt a low, degraded creature!"

"How do you know that?" interrupted the Marquise.

The two women looked at each other. The Comtesse was the first to look down and to speak.

"God has chastised that person, and he will continue to do so."

"You think so?" stiffly said the Dowager.

"Yes, until she is brought to her senses. And you could have all the glory of that conversion, if you chose."

"She has often taught me the true Christian doctrine." The Dowager enjoyed the effect her words would have upon the narrow-minded fanatic.

"No, dear Marquise, I cannot admit that. The

good done out of the Church is not truly Christian." Madame de Blangy shook her head despondently. "Do you realize what you are doing in letting that person come here? You are setting a deplorable example." The Comtesse was losing all restraint, as she thought it her duty to admonish her old friend. "Evidently you do not realize the danger of your course," she said snappishly.

"What danger?" The Comtesse was not observant, otherwise she would have seen that her hostess strongly objected to being reprimanded, especially by people whom she considered her inferiors in intellect; but she did not notice the threatening glance which the Dowager gave her, nor the sudden straightening of her small body; so proceeded with her lecture.

"You will be compromised, there is no doubt about it. That person must have some deep plan in coming here, which she will carry out unscrupulously; and you are exposing yourself to being ill-judged by——"

"At my age one is only judged by God!" interrupted the Dowager. The spare figure wrapt in a modest garb seemed to care no more about worldly opinion than she cared for the fashions.

The Comtesse felt that she had been put in her place somewhat roughly; but her ardour was not cooled down so easily, and being vexed with the reproof of her hostess she meant to sting her back.

"Still, dear Marquise, you did not hesitate to break with your daughter at the time of the Dreyfus affair."

"Do not recall that terrible event!" The words came brokenly forth from her lips.

"You are right; let us try to forget that moment of raving madness which France went through." The Comtesse spoke softly, hypocritically pouring oil on the fire.

"There is no question of France, but of my daughter, towards whom I have not been just."

"How is that?" and the Comtesse bent forward in anxious expectation of some gossip of which she had not yet heard. "You always acted nobly; it was a

sacrifice, we all know it ; but one must sometimes shut one's heart to tenderness."

The Dowager fidgeted with the arms of her easy-chair.

"For instance," persistently continued the Comtesse, "my brother-in-law quarrelled for ever with his only sister on account of that terrible affair ; and heaven knows how these two had been devoted to one another before that time ! It nearly killed her ; but my brother-in-law is irreconcilable ; his ideas are too chivalrous on the point of political honour to ever forgive his sister."

"Perhaps political honour would benefit by the addition of a little humanity." The Dowager's voice had lost its irritable tone, and her eyes looked far away in search of a solution of many problems which had troubled her lately.

The dinner-bell was heard.

"Is it half-past six already ?" exclaimed the Comtesse.

"Yes. You know your room, the yellow one. Dinner is at a quarter past seven."

The hour of passionate wrangling and mean vexations had passed ; the well-bred woman of the world was the hostess once more, holding to her face the mask which hid the violent emotions that had a moment ago been reflected on her features.

The Comtesse rose from her comfortable seat with difficulty.

"I'll leave this newspaper ; and you will be able to read the articles at your leisure." Her voice had lost the accent of conviction with which she had tried to convince the Marquise of her duty towards society ; and as she walked along the corridors which led to her own room, she reflected upon the mental condition of her hostess. She sighed and nodded her head in sign of pity for this old ruin of a glorious past, who had lost the keen interest in all the vital questions of the day. The great principles were disappearing : Christian virtues, political honours, religion, there was nothing left. Poor France ! She was witnessing the

downfall of all that had once made her great and respected.

Arrived at her door she opened it softly; a benignant smile parted her lips. Heaven forbid that she should ever become apathetic and callous like the old Dowager, and lose the power to interest herself in all the grave questions of her country! and she hoped to keep to the end of her life a clear notion of what was her duty, and never to confuse wrong with right.

"Poor Marquise," whispered the Comtesse sadly, as she rang the bell for her maid.

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## CHAPTER XX

MADAME DE BLANGY proved to be well informed; Roland de Laya had returned to Limeray, whither Marie de Cardaillan's letters followed him. She was not going to give him up just as her hopes began to revive. If ever he had thought of making Lucienne his mistress, his duel with her husband had for ever severed what relations there might have been between them. The future was hers, and she was determined not to miss any opportunity of winning Roland back. In her first letter she humbly confessed her wrong-doings. She had forged Lucienne's handwriting; but it had been done in a moment of mad jealousy, and to ruin the rival whom she hated. Every argument that a woman can bring forward to soften the wrath of the man she loved, Marie brought to bear on Roland. She recalled to him the incidents of her own married life, Cardaillan's vices, the first awakening of a girl of eighteen in the arms of a dissolute man of thirty-five. Her childless hearth, her empty heart, her embittered soul were so many excuses for her unscrupulous actions, and she hoped to touch him by

their recital. Of course she had had lovers—sincerity was safer with a dare-devil like Laya—but at the bottom of the cup of pleasure had always been a bitter drop of gall, which had invariably poisoned the sweetness of love.

“Ha! ha! Marie wraps her revenge in a cloud of sentimentality.” Roland had paused after reading her letter for the second time. Was this a natural sequence to their unnatural mode of life, he asked himself, or had he been cruel to her? He had certainly loved her once, he had thrilled at the touch of her hand, at her voice; and her reckless wit had maddened him to infatuation. What mattered now the quality of the passion they had had for one another; they had been sincere, and the proof of sincerity lay in the fact of their coming face to face with their own souls at this critical hour of life. Her revenge had helped to touch the very keynote of her nature, and it was when her heart was bleeding inwardly that she knew how desperately she loved him. It was not her fault if their passion had been accompanied by some of the petty subterfuge of a society which had moulded them both to its image. Marie had had many lovers before she met Roland, and at forty all she knew of love was the brutality of violent amours, and their abrupt terminations. But her relations with Roland had been different, and a combination of psychological and physiological circumstances had caused the postponement of the inevitable parting for a longer period.

At twenty-two Roland had known of life as much as any young man knows of it—the gutter—sometimes a dirty one, at other times a clear stream; but, anyhow, a rivulet which runs through the streets, and carries along in its bubbling current all the refuse of a crowded thoroughfare. Therefore, if he loved a woman, it was for reasons other than the love which the gutter can provide; and it was not for the passion she had showed him, but for her originality and unscrupulous wickedness that he had been attracted to Marie, and had for

several years been comparatively faithful to her. Constancy is a vain word in questions of love, and it is a woman's folly to exact it from a man whose relations to her are in perpetual contradiction to her code of morals, her physical temperament and her place in society. Marie had accepted everything, and had never reproached him for his infidelities. This attitude was the cause of her success with men, and perhaps one of the reasons of her influence over Roland. She had all the charm of the *demi-mondaine*, whose supreme wisdom is to put men at their ease, and never to exact from them anything that might cool their passion. The woman of the world who gives herself up to gallantry is more reckless and more cynical than the lowest *demi-mondaine*, because she falls from a higher level, and the *abandon* of the woman who, without any excuse, slides down the high walls of society, is more complete than that of the woman who applies all her mental powers to rise out of the mud in the world of debauchery.

Since Roland's return to Limeray, he had received letters from Marie nearly three times a week. He answered once or twice, taking compassion upon the woman whom he felt he could not blame any more. If he had killed his adversary, he was now vanquished by a more terrible enemy—fate—who had for ever separated him from the woman whom he had seen but twice, in strange circumstances, and who would now for ever shun his presence as that of her worst enemy. Marie knew that Lucienne would never cross his path, and she loved him more and more for the suffering she had been able to inflict on him. There was now, in her love for him, the fierce joy of the animal who spreads his claws over the victim he has conquered; but there was also a sentiment of pity which brought hot tears to her eyes for the man whom she knew to be vanquished and down on his luck. She had also hot tears of pity for herself, and she felt the tragic emotions which wring a woman's heart, when in the decline of her life she loses the passionate love which made her life interesting and joyful.



She wrote to him expressing her hope of becoming once more what she had been to him, and set forth the misery of her solitary life deprived of his love. But she did not tell him of the agony of despair which wrung her heart, and which drove her out every night to theatres, music-halls, to suppers at Durand's, and night revels at Tabarin and Maxim. She did not confide to him the haunting madness which compelled her to peer into the faces of the *demi-mondaines*, to learn the secrets which would give her the power to keep her lover in spite of the ravages of time. She scrutinized their meretricious appearance with scorn and envy ; and, whilst she could have scratched their eyes out with hatred, she would gladly have humbly hung on their lips to know what she could do to keep her lover. She was as tragic as she was ridiculous ; but the agony she went through made her more interesting than when her outward appearance was more in harmony with the passion which filled her heart ; for she loved ; if not more than she ever had done, yet differently. She loved him for all the wrong she had done him ; for the remorse she knew he felt, at having killed Jean Darlot ; she loved him for so many causes which did not exist before ; and also because a woman who gives her last love to a man showers on him the tenderness of the affections of which she has been deprived.

There was in her sexual passion for Roland a ray of motherly fondness, such as a woman feels for the son who emancipates himself from her influence ; whilst, at the same time, her passion, thwarted by fate, acquired a morbid frenzy which unbalanced her physically as well as mentally.

The mere thought of his looking at another woman made her heart sicken ; and hot waves would rush over her at the memory of his kiss ; whilst tears of despair mounted to her throat as she recalled the voice that murmured passionate words in her ear. She wrote like a mistress and like a mother. On one page she hit cruelly, like a woman who loves and could kill ; on another page she cooed, and healed the wound

in his heart, as only a woman can do who loves unselfishly. He would see how she would love him, and how grateful she could be to him for his love. It was pitiful ; but the pity of it was that it was sincere. She was capable of a great deal for him ; for, the intense pity which she felt for herself—for her decaying self—was so great that it acted as a stimulant on her worldly mind, and stirred her once frivolous nature to reckless despair. There was a dauntless spirit behind that mass of gauze and chiffon ; but Roland had never taken the trouble to lift up the gauze and view the tragic powers of her heart ; moreover, she was herself ignorant of what she was ; for the hour had then not struck in which she would come face to face with her own heart.

She knew that the fatal issue of the duel had made a deep impression on him ; that he had, at first, tried to throw it off by travelling abroad for a time ; and that on his return to Paris, his wife had brought an action for divorce, which he had accepted with his usual cynicism and composure. The rest was known all over Paris in all the fashionable resorts ; the judgment had severed his link with the woman—the wife—whom he never had loved, but whom he had always despised for her second-rate intellect and heartless nature. He had disdainfully torn off that page, and closed the book of his matrimonial experiences. When the moment came to face a critical situation, he could do it with dignity, and he could always bow himself gracefully out of a scrape with a woman, were she even his wife. But it was more difficult to evade the haunting face of a dead man.

On the morning of the duel, he had made up his mind to have it soon over—a scratch, and honour would be saved, and his adversary satisfied. He had nothing against Darlot. He had prevented the man from being the aggressor. That was all he wanted ; Jean might go home, and be happy, whilst Roland would remain content with his triumph, and pleased to have given the infuriated artist a sharp lesson in good behaviour.

But Jean's attitude was anything but reassuring. His face betrayed a deep emotion, which Roland never once attributed to fear. "Is it right to fight in that condition?" he had inquired of Doctor Besnard. "The sooner it is over, the better," Jean had roughly replied. "Why would that madman insist on rushing forward to his death?" Gaston had exclaimed. "If he had not been killed, Laya would have been," Edmond had replied.

It was in self-defence that Laya had struck; they all knew it; and no one ever thought of blaming a man for not allowing his adversary to kill him—even the humane Dr. Besnard. But the dying man's face, the words which escaped from his distorted mouth, were for ever imprinted in his adversary's mind, and would never be effaced from his memory. In vain had he tried to forget; the process of crushing memory out of his brain had only brought the cruel incidents into clearer relief; and had even revived incidents of past youth and childhood which he deemed for ever buried. He remembered once having been assaulted on the road by an idiot of considerable strength, although only fourteen years of age. Roland had kicked and scratched, and the creature, falling on to a heap of stones had hit his head, whilst Roland had taken to his heels. On relating his adventure to his mother, who folded him in her arms, he had remarked that he could have used the knife he had in his pocket, and stabbed him with it. His mother, clasping his slender form to her panting heart, had pressed her lips on his to muffle his words.

"My beloved, I would die to save your life; but I could not bear to owe your life to any cowardly action of yours." All was so real now; he felt his mother's lips; heard her voice; her arms held him close to her in a fond, desperate embrace. Why had he never recalled this incident? How much would have been spared! His mother's words seemed to light up the dark corner of his life. It was true that a man's life was one of perpetual self-defence against fate, against

the worldly attacks upon his vanity, pride and ambition. The duel of sex was another combat out of which the man invariably got the better, at the expense of woman's independence and happiness. He had conquered life, it was true, in a worldly sense ; but at what cost ? And now the whole structure of his social apotheosis was crumbling to earth, carrying along with it the man who realized for the first time the complete bankruptcy of life.

But although he thoroughly measured the depth of the abyss into which he had fallen, still he was linked to a social chain which could not be cut as soon as one perceived the futility of its fabric. The routine of life held him yet in its implacable system ; and if the inside of the structure had sunk, never to rise again, there was still the external edifice which hid from the world the inner *débâcle*.

He closeted himself in his library, correcting proofs, and writing leaders for the various papers to which he contributed. He sat up late into the night, and when he had written the last word of one article, he took up a fresh sheet of paper and began another leader. An almost imperceptible smile would now and again part his lips ; it was the only sign he made in passing from one train of thought and conviction to another, whilst the pen glided noiselessly and regularly over the page, like a swan on a smooth lake. The most contradictory ideas flowed from his brain with mathematical precision ; he was thoroughly at his ease in that double game ; arguments for both sides dropped from his pen, expressed with a force of logic which caused the Parisian public to wonder who could be the authors of the brilliant articles containing such diametrically opposed views.

He had the rare power of seeing instantaneously the two sides of a question, and when he had set himself a task, the argumentative form of either side was expounded with clearness and force, without ever confusing the two opposite convictions. His brain was a well-tuned instrument which could bring out every quality of sound : from the deepest accents of despair

to the highest thrill of mirthful tones. He used to call his leaders his brain duels; for journalism in his mind had replaced brigandage, and journalists were now the banditti of thought who picked up their ideas wherever they chose, and defended them at the point of their pens.

Late one afternoon Roland was seated at his writing-table; the shadows were creeping into the room, and enwrapping in a dark shroud the large table at which he sat. Presently he pushed away the proofs in front of him, and laying down his pen, rose, and seated himself in his easy-chair, gazing into the blazing wood fire which hummed its melancholy little tune in the deep silence.

He watched for a long while the shadows gathering in the room. Gradually the outline of the book-cases disappeared in the darkness; the picture-frames vanished into the walls. Then suddenly the blazing logs illumined the whole place; throwing patches of golden light on the pictures, on the books behind their panes of glass. The flames danced up and down the folding doors which led into the hall, bringing into vivid relief the brass handles, and lending to the prosaic furniture an animated and fantastic appearance. It was not fancy, though; the door had turned on its hinges; Roland listened intently, and fixed his eyes on it. Yes, it had creaked; suddenly the door opened wide, and a woman's form stood on the threshold. She advanced into the room, passing out of a ray of light into the shade, to be illumined again by the flames of the wood fire.

Roland slowly stood up, helping himself out of his *fauteuil*, with his hands on the arms of his chair.

"Madame, you were in my thoughts when you came in."

"Have you ever been compelled to follow an impulse which was stronger than your will?" She was looking down, and the words came from her lips as if she were in a trance.

"It is what I was wont to call instinct." He let

himself drop into his chair, when Lucienne had taken the chair beside him.

"You are ill?" she said, leaning towards him. Her face was lighted up by the fire.

"Ah! ill is perhaps not the correct word—tired—yes." After a moment of silence, "It is strange you should have come in at this precise moment. I have not been out since I arrived a fortnight ago. All alone here, I sink within myself and I wait."

"What are you waiting for?"

"For that which I have been waiting for ever since I can remember—the revelation of what is the meaning of life."

"Life!" She spoke as if in a reverie. "There are as many lives as there are individuals. It is a canvas on which each one embroiders, for ever, patterns that vary according to the one who holds the needle."

Roland bowed his head and stifled a sob. His arm lay over the chair, and the signet he wore on his small finger dropped on to the carpet. Lucienne picked it up; and as Roland bent forward to receive it, he touched her fingers and their eyes met.

"Have you come to reproach me for having ruined your life?" The old habit of irony was still to be heard in the tones of his voice.

"I do not quite know why I have come," and she made a movement with her arm.

"Does it not remind you of another meeting when you came to plead for your happiness? I behaved like a—no, I shall not say what I mean—I behaved like a man of my world, who plays with honour, happiness, and women's hearts, as though they were so many balls to juggle with. Ah! would to God your husband had killed me. He would have been spared, and I should have been spared this agony."

"You suffer!" She bent over the arm of his chair.

"I suffer from many things," he answered bitterly. "First of all from a bad digestion—quite enough to spoil a man's views of life; then, from social failure. You know my wife has divorced me; I know it is not

worth talking about, but I was not accustomed to being vanquished ; and then, I suffer from having been awakened out of an impossible dream. The *mise en scène* of my worldly life has been pulled down, and behind its *débris* I discovered two truths : that honour, as our society instituted its codes, is a mere sham ; and that the only woman who has really interested me is now perforce my enemy."

"Enemy ! No, I am not your enemy !" exclaimed Lucienne. "I do not know your errors ; I only know that you suffer, and that we all suffer from the same wrongs. I came in contact with what you call the world, totally ignorant of all it contained of misery and treachery, under its frivolous exterior ; I had no traditions, no accepted codes or principles, except those that guide me to do on the spur of the moment that which seems true to myself."

"They named you the Nymph. They know not how truly the epithet suits you ; you are the symbol of nature. You are as free as you are harmonious ; as strong as you are graceful. Your nature has its roots deeply attached to the earth, and your soul soars above the clouds, unfettered by traditions. You use your instinct as others use their experience. You came amongst us, simple and true, but we snatched from you what you loved best. Your brow was serene, your step light, and your heart joyful ; see what we have done for you ! We are poison to those who have not been inoculated with our infection. Leave our deleterious atmosphere—return to your simplicity."

"I came here to-day—I found you ; I do not regret it."

"You do not regret seeing your husband's murderer ?" The words slipped from him before he could control himself.

"You are not that," she said, putting up her hand in front of her. "I feel no hatred for you—only pity. Ah !" She saw the expression on Roland's face change. "Do not believe that I give you a merely sentimental pity ; no, I pity you as

the victim of social wrongs ; I pity also the Priest who refused me his help."

"The past cannot help you," despondingly said Roland. "You appealed to a shadow who repeated to you the words spoken two thousand years ago—they were mere words ; and they were to your aching heart what the mirage is to the traveller in the desert, leading him on to hope and hope, until he drops on the burning sands, thirsting for the drop of water which he believed within his reach."

"I asked the *man* to help me, not the Priest," softly said Lucienne.

"Man no more, God not yet ; that is the definition of the poor being who deluded you, and who, worst of all, deludes himself." After a few seconds' silence he turned round, and resting his chin in his hand, he looked at her. "I wonder you stay here alone—with me ! When I think of our last interview !"

"Yes." She rose and lifted up her head triumphantly. Her black dress clung round her gracefully ; her slender figure had acquired a suppleness which lent a greater fascination to her beauty. "I fear nothing ; I shall come again, if you wish it ?" She came close to him, and stooping down, laid her hand on his shoulder. She felt a tremor run through her fingers ; and saw a flash cross his eyes as they met hers.

"You would come again ?" He stood up, and they faced each other. For a moment he was once more the man of past years ; ardent, young, thrilling with all the passionate emotions that a beautiful woman awakened in him.

"Why not ?" she answered calmly.

She was at his mercy ; no one in the house at this hour would hear her if she called. To hold that woman in his arms, to feel her resisting limbs, then to feel the weight of her body on his breast, finally giving way to overpowering languor. Here was the one opportunity in his life for which he would have sacrificed a great deal—and he could not seize it. The flash of passion in his dark eyes died out, like



a flash of lightning in the dark night, and he murmured, "You are not afraid of me?"

"No," she replied, so softly that her lips hardly moved.

"You will be accused of callousness."

"Let them accuse me."

"Of depravity," he continued.

"What matters!"

"But you must hate—it is your duty to hate me!" He spoke like a man fighting against a beautiful dream out of which he fears to wake.

"I loved when I first breathed. It came to me as naturally as to drink water when I was thirsty. I loved my unknown mother; my father, only seen but once. I loved Jean with all the impulse of my whole being. Later on, I was told that my mother had abandoned me, therefore I had to forget her and despise her; and I was taught that to love a man was sinful unless it were sanctioned by law and religion; and lastly, I learn that I am culpable in seeing you—that my duty is to loathe you, and that of my children to curse the man who took their father's life away. Even the Priest turned away from me in disgust for wishing to see the Dowager who unconsciously had been a factor in my great loss. The sham code of honour which placed the deadly weapon in your hand is the same as the shallow principle which requires me to loathe you; but I do not know that law of retaliation; I only know the law of love. I only know that we are two sufferers, and that we can help one another."

"I cannot help you," he answered despondently. "You have already helped me—but I must ask you," and he came close to her, as if the words he was going to speak could only be heard by her alone—"your husband . . ."

"Ah!" she interrupted him. "You know how I loved him; how I love him!"

"Could you love another?" he whispered.

"He gave life to my dormant nature; he gave life to my children."

"There are other loves besides that one ; and your nature is capable of knowing them all." The room was now quite enveloped in darkness, and the logs in the hearth were burnt to cinders. Their two forms were hardly visible to one another ; their voices seemed to come from far away, and to speak symbolic words.

"Would *he* not suffer, did he know your presence here ?"

"Why ?" answered she. "Had he killed you, should I have turned with disgust from him ? Love effaces every stain."

"Could you love me ?" spoke the voice in the dark.

"I love you," answered the other voice out of the darkness.

"The world will not understand you."

"No matter, you and I understand each other, so does he."

"You will go through the world misjudged. Mud will be thrown at you—for you are the enigma which the world has not been able to decipher. But I shall not tell you what you are, or what you will be. I shall not break the spell which is around you ; but you have made me see that nothing is worth living for except——"

"What ?" the voice softly murmured.

"I cannot tell you. You have taught me the first lesson a woman ever did, namely, that you are free to love—to give yourself to the man you love—or to refuse yourself." There was a slight quiver in the voice that spoke the last words. The dying out of old traditions ; the parting with fond prejudices which had made man master of woman, body and soul, were pathetic to him. "You are free to choose the quality of love which you intend to give the one whom you love, without incurring man's wrath or his contempt. This is why you are safe with me ; for you are free, and you have broken the sham laws by which society holds together. You are the woman brave enough to stand alone without the props of the

past, and strong enough to keep her equilibrium without staring at a far distant future which never comes any nearer; you are free, and love is your kingdom."

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## CHAPTER XXI

How shallow his political polemics appeared to him when he tried to return to them after Lucienne's departure. The great simple lines of life seemed to cut through the paltry paper like a knife. Of what use were these brain duels? *Vérité* in one paper, *Ex æquo* in another! Would these advance the world's progress one step, or free humanity from bondage? He had only used politics as a vent for his superabundant vitality; and his playing havoc with principles and flying in the face of society were the consequences of his complex and incomplete nature. He saw it clearly now, and he was sick at heart, because he had lost faith in his own powers; and he knew himself well enough to know that he could not build himself up a new belief.

Proofs arrived every morning. He corrected them; but when the papers containing the various leaders appeared, he did not even open their wrappers, but threw them into the wastepaper-basket untouched. He wrote mechanically, but took no interest in his productions. Since Lucienne's visit he lived as though in a dream, and, indeed, often wondered whether the interview with her were but a fabrication of his morbid imagination. Her presence in his room belonged to the world of mystery; and at dusk, when the shadows had enveloped the place, he would sit motionless in his chair, and listen in the stillness for the voice which had spoken strange words to him. He had come to realize that one action committed in total disregard of all social rules, and in accordance with the doctrine

of be-true-to-yourself did more than all the sophists' teachings, or all the logician's systems, to break the chain of hatred, to which each of us are so ready to contribute.

He understood now that the misery which human beings inflict on their fellow-creatures is but the reaction of a grievous pain received from another. But it needed a dauntless courage and a sure foot to take a stand upon so high a pinnacle, asking no help from the past, demanding no retribution from the future. Lucienne's ignorance of her ancestry, and of all traditions and accepted principles enabled her to be the symbol of a future conception of life. By living intensely in the present and making her thoughts take shape in actions, she would reach the highest form of practical morality, and thereby express a new state of relations between human beings.

She loved him, that he believed; although not as he loved her. The blood rushed to his face when he thought of her as he had seen her last. The haunting remembrance of her hand on his arm, of her eyes gazing into his, made him giddy with the wild longing to see her. But she had touched in his heart a chord of nobility, which had never been touched by any woman since his mother's death—and for that reason he would save her from his love and from her own generosity. He felt he could have loved that woman not only for her physical loveliness, but for her mental beauty. But he was aware of his own limitations, for the downfall of all the fabric of his life had awakened in him the knowledge of his own deficiencies. He belonged to the past—to all that was fated to disappear. In fact, he was an unbalanced being, who had tried to adapt his very complex nature, handed down to him from a remote past, to the exigencies of a modern world, for which he was insufficiently equipped.

Were he to give way to the temptation of seeing Lucienne again, and of letting himself be loved by her, it would be her ruin. He could only drag her down into the abyss, like the somnambulist who loses

his equilibrium as he suddenly wakes from his dream. He would let her pass by without lifting a finger to stop her, and he would remain chained to his miserable fate and wither away with the *débris* of an older world. She was the symbol of life—he was the symbol of degeneracy—of a decadent society, who invariably answered “yesterday” or “to-morrow” to all human questions, and to whom she had had the courage of proclaiming the sanctity of “to-day.” She would go through the world, as she had done in Crespy, often misjudged, always misunderstood. Her soul was an unspotted mirror, in which those who looked into it only saw the reflection of their own passions, and attributed to her all that they saw reflected in the mirror. She would pass through the world as she had passed through life, as she had sat at his side and vanished into the night ; touching in his soul the sonorous chords of love and disinterestedness, but leaving in his heart, and in the memory of all those whom she had passed by, an impression of unreality and unsubstantiality.

One morning he opened his letters at breakfast. There was one from Marie. He opened it. He had feared the woman’s recklessness, but still had hoped her worldly sense of self-preservation would have made her accept the situation, which no one on earth could alter. But she had thrown down the gauntlet, and it meant war to the knife between them or else their acceptance of a dishonourable peace for him.

“I say, Joseph,” as the valet came in with a dish of buttered eggs, “what’s the news and gossip about ? It is a long while since you reported to me any village news.”

“Does Monsieur intend to go to the hunting-party at the Comte de Marsy’s ?” asked Joseph as he set the dish down carefully before his master.

“Ha ! ha ! my poor fellow, I’ve done with that. Who is staying at the Château ?”

“Well, Monsieur, there’s the Duchesse de Vallorbes, with the Duke——”

“How shocking,” laughed Roland.

"Then, the Comtesse de Barye, and the Marquis de Noirmont——" and the valet hesitated.

"Is that all?" indolently inquired Roland, resting one arm over the back of his chair. "You seem to hide something."

"*Oui*, Monsieur; but I am afraid of paining Monsieur le Baron."

"My good man, nothing can pain me any more from that quarter—speak out."

"Well, Madame la Baronne is there." Joseph rubbed his hands together nervously.

"My wife! Ha! ha! ha! With her lover, I hope? There are cases when it is immoral to be without one!"

"Ah! I see Monsieur does not mind." He looked relieved, and grinned from ear to ear. "Yes, Monsieur de Terrac is there; but so is Madame's mother also."

"Ah! the feast is complete. Go on—anything more?"

"Yes." Joseph was delighted, and whilst he took plate and dish away, and replaced them by others, he chattered to his heart's content.

"Monsieur de Marsy's cook, whom I saw at the market yesterday, told me that Madame la Baronne was only staying two or three days, and that Madame la Marquise was coming—I think she arrives to-day. Of course the two ladies could not meet, so Madame de Marsy arranged it very well. She is very fond of Madame de Cardaillan—every one is, she is so amusing, and so generous."

Roland's face darkened, and he pushed his plate away.

"You are sure that Madame de Cardaillan is expected?" inquired Roland.

"Perfectly, Monsieur le Baron."

Roland threw his napkin on the table and rose. Striking a match he lit a cigarette and leaned against the mantelpiece, while Joseph cleared the table away as slowly as he could.

"Madame Darlot's relations have arrived at the Farm"—Joseph swept away the crumbs with a silver

scoop—"no one believed in their existence until now, and although they only arrived two days ago, Madame Darlot, senior, has made friends with the whole village, and the Mayoress is constantly seen hanging out of her window to catch her and have a good gossip with her."

"Ah!" Roland's voice sounded far away, and his interest in Joseph's gossip had died away.

"What is the father like?" he inquired, as in a reverie.

"H'm! a silly old man. I suppose Madame Lucienne leads him by the nose; but the mother looks like a virago who could hold a regiment by the ears!"

Joseph could not make up his mind as to his master's relations with Lucienne, although he openly declared to all who would listen to him that he did not believe a word of his master's *liaison* with her. The husband and wife were, no doubt, a couple of adventurers who had failed in their attempt at black-mailing Monsieur de Laya. That was his private opinion, and nothing would make him give it up. He knew his master's intrigues as well as Roland did himself; and he had never known him to have a *liaison* with a woman who did not belong to the great world, or to the *demi-monde*.

Roland, hearing his valet's remarks, felt reassured. If Lucienne had her husband's parents with her, she would not come for some days at least; and even a few days gained were a great deal in a life like his, in which the unexpected played so large a part.

Marie was coming to try to win him back. She was capable of doing anything in order to reconquer his love—or to revenge herself. He could defend himself, but how could he defend Lucienne against the unscrupulous woman who had once tasted of the sweet poison of revenge? He could do nothing but wait, for Marie would be sure to come and strike a bargain with him, and then—it would be time for him to follow the destiny which was in store for him.

The day was bright, the frost had given, and

through the open window the sweet scents of trees and freshly-turned soil floated into the library. Already the little heads of violets peeped through the leaves, and Roland inhaled their delicate perfume as he stood in front of the window.

"This will not be much of a hunting day," he murmured, looking at the trees on which the small buds were perceptible. There was in the atmosphere a lightness and clearness which sent thrills through one's whole body; the sky was blue, and the distant horizon, losing that neatness of outline peculiar to wintry days, was wrapt in an opalescent mist which was the presage of a premature spring.

"Are you thinking of me, Roland?" A soft hand was on his shoulder. He turned round.

"It is you, Marie!"

"You do not seem very much delighted to see me," said Madame de Cardaillan, with a bitter accent in her voice.

"Pleased—I don't know; but certainly not astonished," he replied, smiling faintly.

"You expected me—I told you I would come to you. I am, if anything, a woman of my word. It is the only form of honour that I know."

"You come for——?" ironically asked Roland.

"For you," she answered with bated breath; and, taking his arm, she laid her head on his shoulder. "You cannot forget the past."

"It is because I do not forget it, that——"

"That you shunned me," interrupted Marie. "We cannot part; our lives are too much linked to one another to break the bond that unites us."

"Our past is full of ruthless passions, incongruous sentiments which seem out of date at this present moment." He looked down at the small figure which clung to him. The swollen eyebrows drooped over the wrinkled eyelids, and two sharp lines divided the forehead horizontally, like deep ruts at the sides of a road. Pity filled his heart for this poor human creature who struggled tragically for life—a sensuous life it was true—but still, life. She was the wreck of



something lovely, and to regain some of the past happiness she held out her pleading hands and begged humbly for some more love.

Before him the tragic comedy of a desolate heart was acted; the longing for love of an ardent woman, and the knowledge that old age had already unfolded its dark wing over her.

"I will not give you up; we have been each other's pupils, Roland, and I have your love in my very blood."

Roland sat down, and she let herself drop on to her knees at his feet.

"For your sake I could do anything." She put her arms round him. "My heart is sore——"

"Poor Marie!" His voice was soft. His heart had its wounds also, and life had imprinted her inalienable mark of servitude. Yes, they were two corpses chained to one another—two wrecks bound to sink together. She was right, they were each other's pupils, and there was between them a bond which made the one responsible to the other.

"Roland, you have been down on your luck lately, but it will be all right again. You will lead the world with your pen, and turn foes into friends—at least into sycophants. Let me come to you. We can make life brilliant once more, and it is so stale without you." She nestled close to him, pressing her cheek against his hand.

"Marie, one cannot revive a dead past." He laid his other hand upon her hair, trying softly to push her away.

"Roland, do not throw me away. I've suffered hell upon earth when I thought I had lost you, but in my agony I have lost the last vestige of scruple."

"I do not wish to hurt you, poor Marie."

"You pity me!" she hissed between her teeth, drawing herself up and looking at him with her clear blue eyes. "I have not been accustomed to that from you——"

"I cannot pity, for I need your commiseration far more than ever you need mine."

"Roland!" exclaimed Marie, as she rose and placed her hands upon his shoulders, meanwhile closely scrutinizing his expression, "a woman has changed you!—you were not in the habit of seeking for sympathy, nor did your heart ever harbour pity—pride stood you in lieu of it." She stood erect. "But, mind you, if you have thwarted me once, it does not follow that you will get the better of me next time! I separated you from——" She suddenly stopped, and tossing her head impudently—"By the bye, Roland, I never knew you were so clever at fencing!"

She went to the chimney and arranged her hair in the looking-glass, giving occasional side glances at Roland.

"Marie, you do not know what you are saying!" He stood up, and leaning against the writing-table he crossed his arms over his breast, repressing a violent desire to knock down the woman who had spoken. Marie had crouched on the carpet in front of the fire, warming her hands, and smiling mischievously.

"Bah!" She shrugged her shoulders. "It is no use our trying to humbug each other. We are both as unscrupulous as we can possibly be, you and I," and she laughed a soft laugh. "I also can deal blows, and you know—only a woman knows how to hit another." After a pause she murmured, "I ruined her once."

"Marie, you gave yourself away when you confessed to having written that letter. I have it here written by you—I wonder at you, a clever woman!"

"Ha! ha!" she sneered. "Who would ever believe you?" and she snapped her fingers in the air; "besides which, the world would hiss you off the stage for turning on to me. I, your mistress for ten years; your partner, your initiator in smart depravity! Bah! Even Edmond de Savigny, the Puritan, would not think it correct! No, *mon cher*; if I have done a dirty trick, you would be doing a dirtier one in giving me away. We have taken each other for better and for worse, we must abide by it. For us there is no Divorce Court to which we can bring our

grievances, and expect a decree *nisi* to sever our bond. The world looks on at our conflict as it does at a spectacle. It watches our love-duel with the fierce interest with which the public watches a bull-fight, applauding at the ripping open of horses, hissing at the indolence of the bull, and at the blundering matador. The wounds we inflict on one another are the pastimes of society, who will not take up the cudgel for either of us, my dear friend. The world is our arena—they make space for us to fight—they fill the seats from top to bottom, and give us a fine reception, for we are there to amuse them, to make them thrill; to shock them even at times, but lo and behold, if either of us takes the game *au sérieux* and turns to the gallery for pity and sympathy, ha! ha! it will turn away in disgust, and ask for its money back!"

Marie came close to Roland.

"Roland, the world has yet something to offer us. Let us take what it can give; besides, we are no good at any other game. Take us away from the deleterious atmosphere of our restaurants, and from our overheated drawing-rooms and boudoirs, and we fall off our perches like imported humming-birds."

"I prefer your cynical spirit to your sentimentality," said Roland impudently, looking at her with satisfaction, as a pleased critic looks at a first-night performance.

"And your devilment and irony please me better than your appeal to pity and sympathy," retorted Marie, half shutting her eyes, like a cat who purrs and hides her claws under her fur.

"When are you leaving the Marsys?" asked Roland.

"To-day; my luggage has gone with my maid. Did you think I had come here for anything else but to see you? The hunting party was a pretext for me. It was deadly dull up there, I could not have stood another day. Oh! I long for the rue de la Paix—for my tea at Ritz—Roland——" She laid her hand on his arm.

"Will you not regret all this one day—when it is

all over?" Roland's face darkened, and his voice trembled.

"Regret what? I do not understand you? Roland."

"Never mind. I am beyond pity"—the words escaped his lips like a sob.

"What is it, Roland?" She held him by the shoulders. "You seem so far away from me." A mist clouded her eyes. "You are not thinking of killing yourself?" Her face was close to his.

"Ah! there are other ways of committing suicide besides that of putting a bullet in one's head." He made a desperate movement to put her away from him.

"I do not understand you," she murmured.

Roland went to the fire-place and touched the electric bell, whilst she watched his movements with curiosity and anxiety.

"Joseph"—the valet was standing at the door—"have the Mercédès in readiness as soon as possible; and be prepared to leave, with my luggage, by the six-thirty train."

"Monsieur le Baron wants the *mecanicien* to be ready also?"

"No, I shall drive Madame la Marquise back to Paris."

"Oh! but Monsieur is not well enough to drive alone. The roads are hard, and it would be imprudent for Monsieur after his illness."

"Do as I tell you, my friend, and don't trouble about me."

"Ah! Roland, you are ill!" and Marie rushed to his side as soon as Joseph had disappeared. "How thoughtless of me not to ask you how you were!"

"It is nothing—a mere chill," he answered.

"No, I am sure you have been neglecting yourself. Ah! Roland, Roland! you need me. I shall nurse you so well. I am convinced that you do not wrap up when you go out—you always were so careless;" and she stroked his cheek with her hand.

"What a strange woman you are!" He took the hand that caressed him, and kissed the delicate fingers. The kiss sent a thrill through her whole being, and

she looked at his emaciated face, which she had not noticed before. Two tears rolled down her cheeks, and she stifled a sob which rose to her throat.

An hour after they were on the road to Paris.

During a week or ten days, the sudden flight of Marie with Laya was the subject of the most dissimilar commentaries. Some judged the event from an inner conviction that all was vanity ; others, with a class hatred which disfigures individuals and events, whilst others of the human aggregates judged from the point of view of their own personal passions, which they erected into fixed principles. But few, if any, judged from within the heart's tragedy which led human beings to commit incongruous actions. It is the human comedy, whose wire-pullers the indifferent public never wishes to see ; nor are they ever inclined to watch the wires which set the dolls in movement. They prefer to hold their sides with laughing, than that their breast should heave with sobs.

The various groups of villagers gathered, either at the innkeeper's drinking place, in the Mayor's courtyard, or the postman's office ; whilst the Priests of the neighbouring parishes gossiped round the Curé's table. The laughter here was as hearty, and the jokes as broad, as any that were heard at the Inn, in the dusty parlour at the Mairie, or in the cottage chimney-corner.

To this rural tittle-tattle, a Parisian *bourgeois* element had been added ; for the old Darlot couple were not above joining the peasants in this evening assembly. Madame Darlot brought her southern impetuosity amongst the cunning peasants of Touraine, who at times smiled at her accent, and questioned the veracity of her assertions. But her violence of sentiments, like that of most southerners, covered a depth of practical, even worldly-wise, philosophy which would have made old Sancho Panza stare. She would occasionally rave to her impassive husband, about the only son whom they had lost ; and would suddenly pop on her hat and run round to the Mayoress to drown her last tears in a glass of Vouvray ; or she would pass her

evening in the innkeeper's private rooms with the well-to-do wine-growers' wives, listening to the shuffle of the dancers' feet next door, and beating time with her foot to old Finot's scrappy violin.

Old Darlot would sit with the men in the Café, relating, in a soft and sorrowful tone of voice, anecdotes of a more romantic period, which brought back to his mind the great painters, musicians and poets who flourished at the time of his youth. The billiard-balls ran less swiftly over the green baize; and the fist of the blacksmith came down less frequently on the table, when old Darlot began the recital of his tales of the Latin Quarter, and School of Fine Arts reminiscences; whilst glasses clinked merrily, like an echo, to the names of Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, Musset, and many others.

The escapade of Madame de Cardaillan and of Roland de Laya opened the flood-gates of his amorous recollections. "Ah! the romantic period was rich in such stories!" he would exclaim. No doubt the Marquise de Cardaillan was far from incarnating George Sand's enigmatic soul; nor had the Baron de Laya much that put one in mind of the author of *The Nights*; and Crespy was certainly most unlike the city of the Doges and of dark lagunes. But passion was inspiring, and imparted eloquence to old Darlot's narrative; whilst the young men interrupted their game to listen, on the pretence of chalking their cues. Sometimes they would nudge each other and giggle; winking at the old man who had lost himself in the reminiscences of his youth, all unconscious that his pipe had gone out meanwhile.

When the story of Musset and George Sand's amours became too psychological, and the recital of the greatest love-duel that had ever been fought, seemed too complex for simple minds whose conception of love and passions was limited to one or two plain facts, then the assembly broke up, roaring vociferously; and old Louvier, grinning from ear to ear, struck the floor with his stick.

"Damn the brat! Ah! I'd 'ave brought my stick

down on to his back, and sent him along to follow the plough! Ha! ha! ha!"

"Always hitting the right nail on the right head!" and the Mayor's fist came down heavily on old Louvier's knee.

But the love story had a weird fascination for them, although they doubted its truth; and they often asked Darlot to repeat the tale, as the public flocks to see a renowned prestidigitator whom they all know to be a humbug.

These boisterous gossips concerning Laya's flight came to Lucienne's ears very much attenuated, like the large waves which break far out at sea, and merely lick the sands and ripple over the shingles; for the villagers never commented on the event before her;—no doubt, from shyness, but a great deal from an innate sense of tact which characterizes the peasants of Touraine. Lucienne felt at peace from having obeyed her first impulse, and told Roland she wished to help him and sympathize with him. He had said that she had already helped him by coming. Was it in making him realize that his love for Marie was not dead, and that the woman who had loved him for so many years had still a claim on him? She pressed her children to her heart, and loved them more deeply, if possible, for the love she believed herself to have rekindled in Roland's heart.

Her home life was full of duties which enthralled her; she felt the charm of the quiet evenings round the table and under the lamp, watching her father-in-law as he modelled his clay, and her mother-in-law sewing some useful garment; while she listened to the babble of her children playing games. The night would follow; and in the silence and solitude her heart would throb wildly, and she would hear and see the husband whom she loved with all the power that was in her. The dark night acted on her mind and senses, intensifying her thoughts and her emotions, and bringing out in painful and vivid relief all the happy incidents of her married life. But the clear morning dispelled the fabrics of her visions;

and she once more belonged to life, thrilling with interest at every detail of her day, like a healthy and well-balanced human being whose bonds are strongly attached to humanity. Her mother-in-law could not, and never had made her out, although she had behaved loyally to her after Jean's death, for his sake and for that of the children; and although she recognized her to be domesticated, and to possess the material virtues necessary to a true woman. But she distrusted the woman whose origin was mysterious, especially as she suspected that origin to be more exalted than her own. In her attitude towards her son's wife there entered a strange mixture of awe and distrust; and whilst she, at times, railed at the classes out of which she believed her daughter-in-law to spring, at other times she treated her with the obsequious attention which the uneducated lavish on those who are enveloped in a sort of social prestige. The old father's serene nature softened the asperities of his wife's southern temperament; to him Lucienne would often speak of Jean, although his poignant grief had receded into the mist of the past; and the memory of his only son's death had lost all the bitterness of the first shock. He refused to dwell upon the painful incidents which had preceded his death, out of delicacy for Lucienne; for, as a man, and a true artist, he was influenced by her beauty, and touched by her sympathetic interest in his humble art. But they both wondered at Lucienne's remaining in Crespy, where nothing but sad memories could assail her, and of her spending long hours at the Château with the Dowager, although latterly she had neglected the Marquise, and had given most of her time to her parents. To old Madame Darlot, Lucienne's great grief—which she never doubted for one instant—was not consistent with the sympathy she expressed for the Marquise, who belonged to a class which ought to inspire her with deep resentment, both on account of her own sad origin and of the disaster to her conjugal happiness. But these human inconsistencies surprised Madame Darlot, who exclaimed to her benevolent



husband that therein lay the proof that Lucienne was not of their own class, for otherwise how could she ever have felt at her ease in the Dowager's drawing-room!

Lucienne had not yet reached that full consciousness which enables one to judge life objectively, whilst still feeling with that power of subjectivity which is the essence of individuality; and although drama had come into her life and stirred the very depth of her woman's heart, she had not yet grasped the complex tragedy which underlies the surface of individuals. The simplicity of her bringing up, the isolation in which she had lived, away from the outer world, had helped to develop, in complete freedom, the conflicting inherited characteristics which concurred in the building up of her individuality. Her subjective nature was so intense that it blinded her to the exterior world, just as a prisoner, shut up in an obscure and silent cell, coming out into the noisy and glaring world, would blink and feel giddy.

She had approached the world, of which she knew nothing, with a flaring torch in her hand, which threw its light over her and the immediate circle round her, whilst it left the rest of her surroundings in opaque darkness. From the intensity of her inner emotions would spring the knowledge of the outer world with a fuller consciousness of life. The magnitude of her grief had been the light which had revealed to her that hatred and resentment were not necessarily the results of sorrow—however unjust the circumstances might be; and her intercourse with the Dowager had thrown a radiancy over what had heretofore been unintelligible to her.

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## CHAPTER XXII

"YOU have come at last, my dear child!" the Dowager exclaimed, as Lucienne was announced one afternoon a few days later. She entered, bringing with her a whiff of a fine April day, and took a low seat close to the Marquise, who handed to her the miniature of a young woman.

"She is very lovely," said Lucienne, holding the velvet frame in her hand.

"Yes, she was very young then; but she is still very beautiful, I believe, although I have not seen her for three years."

"How very long!" remarked the young woman, looking up at the Dowager. "Does she never come here?"

"No," she answered, taking back the picture.

"Ah! I remember, you told me there was a difference in your opinions," said Lucienne. "But why spoil life and happiness for that?"

"You are right, my child, but it seemed very important at the time. Now, I ask myself whether we are not all in the wrong."

"Yes, you were wrong!" exclaimed Lucienne. "What are these puerile dissensions compared to the joys of love!"

"I have come to that time of life," softly spoke the Marquise, "when the events that happened a few years ago seem unimportant when compared to my childhood; and the incidents of my youth rise in my mind with such intense vividness that the sensation is often painful." As Lucienne made a movement towards her, she went on, "Oh! my child, you are too young to know that haunting vision of an early past coming closer and closer to efface the remembrance of more recent events. Is it a sign of mental decadence, or a warning as to what I ought to do? I recall a time in my life when my mother was my guide through a painful period of my youth. I took

her help for granted, and grew accustomed to her moral support, and forgot that my whole life was saved owing to her indefatigable care and love."

"It is easy to repair one's mistakes," said Lucienne, who guessed that the Dowager was thinking of her own conduct towards her daughter.

"No, I cannot repair the long years of mental solitude, when, as a lost ship, my poor child's soul aimlessly drifted away; that is irreparable."

"I cannot believe that anything is irreparable. It is better to make the most of the few remaining opportunities of conferring happiness, than to be consistent with a code of honour which we do not believe in any longer."

"But what can one do to efface the wrong?"

"Think no more of the past, but give all the tenderness which is in your heart."

The little piercing eyes of the Dowager twinkled, not maliciously, but with emotion and shyness.

"It is too late," she whispered.

"It is never too late—a whole life of misunderstanding can be effaced in one hour of perfect love. Ah! do it—forgive!" And, obeying her impulse, she threw herself on her knees, and held the Dowager's hands and kissed them. Close to this old heart, which had for so many years refused to give the love that a mother has for her child, she spoke unreservedly and eloquently. Their respective positions had vanished—rank, position, age—all the barriers that separate human beings had disappeared, and two souls combating the great vital problems of life were face to face.

"Do not let one hour go by without making an effort at reparation; now that you have seen the sham of what separated you from your daughter, think only of what she has suffered. In thinking of your mother, think also of your child. Oh! I beg it of you!" And the two arms of the young woman encircled the meagre form of the Dowager, whose sharp eyes were fixed on the emotional features close to hers. "What has been the result of all the social

reprisals and vindictive passions? Only suffering for all, and in the end—the soul's solitude. Ah! take yourself back in hand—listen to your own conscience, not to that of a social group, and call back the woman who is your child. One hour of complete union between two hearts that nothing more can separate, will compensate for long years of estrangement. When you feel her head on your shoulder, everything will be forgotten."

Lucienne let her head drop on the Dowager's knees, and the latter, lost in the contemplation of the past, laid her little withered fingers on the thick golden mass of hair; she gently patted the temples, the round, white neck; then, lifting the head with her two hands, she held her chin and scrutinized her face, as if searching far away behind the human form.

"And you never knew your mother, you who know all the pulsations of a mother's heart."

Lucienne smiled through the tears that flowed from her eyes.

"I will write to-night," said the Dowager slowly, but firmly. Her voice showed signs of emotion; but Lucienne thought that the long talk had overtaxed her strength, and she rose, taking her hand and kissing it tenderly. As she stood in front of her, she became suddenly conscious of the temerity of her appeal, and fearing lest she had gone too far, stood silent and motionless.

"I realize for the first time for thirty years what I ought to have done—and it is to you that I owe it." The voice of the Marquise was subdued, and her hands were clasped together. "I am tired; and I have to reflect a good deal before I make preparations for Valérie's return—ah! will she consent to come?" The old mouth was twisted into a piteous appeal.

"Oh! she will come—for you will love her," and seeing that the Dowager's features looked worn, Lucienne went quietly towards the door, turning, as she reached it, to bow to the old Marquise. But the old lady had already forgotten her presence, in the mass of thoughts which assailed her. Was it too

late? Would her daughter accept the hand of reconciliation stretched towards her? Her mode of life was so different from that at Crespy. And how would she bring her family to welcome back the reprobate Aunt Valérie? But the Dowager was not in the habit of being thwarted, and she meant to exert her authority over her grandchildren as long as any breath remained in her body.

She turned her chair towards her desk and began to write. The handwriting was small, steady for the advanced age of the writer, and she wrote slowly, carefully, leaving a large margin at each side. The letter was short—and the expression on the Dowager's face, when it was written, was placid and utterly devoid of the emotions which had, a little time ago, determined her present action. She folded the letter with great care, addressed the envelope, and placed it in one of the pigeon-holes of her desk, so that it might be posted next morning.

Next morning, however, she received by the first post a letter from Edmond de Savigny, informing her of Valérie's illness, and of the operation to which she had at last consented a week ago. The operation had been satisfactory, considering the wretched state of health she was in; and he announced his intention to arrive at the Château with Gaston, in order to give the Marquise more circumstantial details of her daughter's condition.

"It is too late," murmured the old Dowager, sitting up in her bed. Her small face, framed in a little white cap tied under her chin, looked smaller, and the spare body wrapped in a white camisole seemed painfully thin—she read and re-read Edmond's note, pursing up her lips in disapproval of its curtness. She was cross with him for not having informed her sooner of her daughter's serious illness. Everything vexed her in him; even the style in which he wrote; and the turn of certain phrases irritated her fastidious taste. Mixed with her grief was a good deal of vexation at being thwarted in her plans. Had he informed her of the operation, she might at least have written to

Valérie ; but—it was all over now—for the Dowager's intuition rarely deceived her, and she felt for certain that if Edmond wrote it was because he had no fears of any reconciliation taking place between her and her daughter.

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"My dear cousin," Gaston had remarked to Edmond, as they sat in the express train which carried them to Tours—"at my grandmother's age, sentiments are blunted ; believe me ; and shocks do not affect one as they would a stronger frame."

"Besides," replied Edmond, "she never really loved any one but my father ; and her heart was closed to all earthly affection the day he died."

"Do you think so ? I believe she never cared for anything but literature ;" and the two men had leaned back in the seats and returned to their newspapers.

A few hours later they arrived at the Château, and having sent word to the Marquise, Edmond was ushered into her bedroom, where she sat at that early hour of the day, in an old white dressing-gown. From the look she gave him on his entrance, he realized that there could not be any question of literature, or childish fads on her part, but that he would have to submit to a severe interrogatory.

As he bent to kiss her hand, she placed her two hands on the arms of her easy-chair.

"And you have let her die without telling me." The reproachful tones of the old Marquise, combined with her cold reception of him, offended Edmond, who stood stiffly in front of her.

"How do you know ?" he cuttingly spoke.

"At my age, one never is deceived."

"Has that person, Madame Darlot—"

"What could she have to tell me ?" she hurriedly interrupted.

Edmond took a chair at a little distance from her.

"All this is very painful, and Gaston and I had meant to spare you the shock."

"To the point, I beg of you. Spare me your speeches." She looked at her grandson with contempt.

"My aunt——"

"My daughter," she vexatiously interrupted.

"Well," Edmond sighed heavily, "your daughter had been ill for a long time, and when she consented to the operation, it was too late to save her. Everything was done to alleviate her suffering, and she passed away in perfect peace. Oh! my dear Grandmother, we must all bless God that she was spared greater pain—and that at last this poor, tormented soul is at rest."

"Tormented; you are right, but—tormented by *you*, by us, by *all*!" Every word was meant to cut deeply into the heart of the man whom she despised and detested. At this critical moment of her life, more than she had ever done before, all the love she had withheld from her daughter turned into gall; all the passion in her nature became a persistent mania of contradictions against this man who had robbed her of her wish.

"I think you are unjust and cruel," he peevishly remarked. "Still, you know as well as I do, how we all suffered from her follies."

"Leave your aunt's memory alone." The Dowager's voice was hissing the words. "To God, and to me, alone it belongs to judge the soul who certainly possessed greater gifts than any of you! Have you anything else to tell me?"

"Yes; but it is difficult to tell, as it will mean referring once more to a person whose name you have forbidden me to mention."

"State facts, but abstain from any comment upon them."

"Your daughter has left a child, whose existence no one knew, and to whom she leaves her fortune—six millions—with the exception of one million and a half which you inherit by law. I fear that this descendant of the Crespys will not do you great honour." Behind the irony of Edmond's speech lurked a certain satisfaction at revenging himself for his Grandmother's insult.

"Leave me for a while to reflect over what has

occurred," she quietly said. "You will lunch alone to-day, and I do not know whether I shall be able to join you at dinner." The softened voice of the Dowager struck Edmond, who once more wondered over the inconsistency of human nature and especially at the contradictoriness of an old heart of ninety-three.

After dinner the two cousins lighted their cigarettes in the smoking-room.

"It is a nasty affair," grumpily said Edmond, dropping into an arm-chair near the fire. "And what will our Grandmother say to this new granddaughter? She is in a vile temper——"

"Bah! Only childish vexation," replied Gaston, who stood against the mantelpiece. "She will have forgotten all this in twenty-four hours; her granddaughter, her daughter's death, and the six millions will have vanished behind her persistent picture of her youth."

"By the bye," suddenly said Edmond, "they gave me, at the Nursing Home, a packet which Aunt Valérie kept by her—addressed to her mother, but I dare say the old lady will take no notice—Félicie tells me she hardly reads anything."

"Ah! Then she must be very low." Gaston threw his cigarette into the fire.

"But, my dear Gaston, it is time to discuss this question. What are we to do?" inquired Edmond, leaning his elbow on the arm of his chair.

"My dear fellow, we've only got one thing to do," interrupted Gaston.

"That is?"

"Well—to annex the Nymph."

"What do you mean?" asked Edmond, crossly.

"Open your arms to her—that's the only way in which we can muzzle her. If she throws mud at us—well, it will be our own mud—not that of the public thoroughfares."

"And you believe that my wife and yours will accept her?" said Edmond, lighting another cigarette.

"My dear Edmond, they will accept her, because



they are women of the world ; full of tact when it suits their interests and wits enough to know that it will be wiser to keep the Nymph in the bosom of the family than out of it—it is time we should rally all our forces. We cannot afford to have another thorn in our side like Aunt Valérie."

"Then you would welcome this new—relation?" In Edmond's mind rankled the bitter regret of having lost—for his children, of course—the inheritance which they had all counted upon.

"Most decidedly," firmly replied Gaston, "it will be the best stroke of worldly business we shall do."

"Still," remonstrated Edmond, "we must respect our Grandmother's feelings, as long as she lives, and consider carefully in what way this reconciliation is to be effected."

The next day, the Dowager's maid informed Edmond and Gaston that they could see the Marquis before lunch.

"I hope you are rested, my dear Grandmother," and Gaston touched her hand with his lips.

"It is a very great blow which you have borne with your usual fortitude," and Edmond bowed low before her. "Here is a packet which was given to me at the Nursing Home. It is addressed to you," and the Dowager took it and put it on her desk.

"Sit down," sharply ordered the Dowager, nodding towards two chairs close to her.

"We shall all need courage to bear this trial with dignity," said Edmond.

"Yes," added Gaston, "the Crespys and Savignys have not had, until now, any bastards in their family."

The Dowager fixed her eyes on him.

"Some one is missing at this interview." She turned her head from one to the other.

"Gertrude and Héléne will arrive early in the afternoon," replied Edmond apologetically.

"I mean my grand-daughter, Lucienne Darlot!" and the Dowager raised her voice.

"You knew?" suddenly spoke Edmond.

"I have already told you that at my age one is rarely deceived—I guessed it months ago. Everything in her reveals a Crespy."

"H'm! crossed with a Dupont," retorted Edmond de Savigny.

"Why is she not here?" she asked in an authoritative voice.

"We could not very well invite her to be present before consulting you." Gaston was beginning to find the interview very entertaining.

"She came here to see me as a stranger; she ought to be here as your cousin now." She lifted her hand in sign of command.

"You are the wittiest woman in France," and Gaston took the hand to his lips.

"You are certainly the bravest woman in our world"—Edmond got up and paced the drawing-room—"but I am afraid Gertrude will not be so easy to persuade."

"When she sees the wisdom of a reconciliation, she will no doubt give up her prejudices, however justifiable they are," said Gaston. "As to *my* wife, I can vouch for her; even if it were for the novelty of the thing, she will have a craze for her new cousin, just as she had a fad for her Mexican dog last year."

"Always joking," sneered the Dowager. "You still think Gyp amusing? Go on doing so. Some day you will consider graveyards the most frolicsome places on earth—or under earth."

"We are quite of your opinion as to what is the wisest course to follow in this case," began Edmond.

"I have no one to consider but my own conscience. You have chosen to hide my daughter's illness from me; you have dared to hide her death from me, and to take upon yourselves to bury her without my knowledge."

"But, my dear Grandmother," interrupted Edmond, coming close to her, "we only thought of saving you trouble, and of sparing your motherly feelings."

"It is in the name of that motherly feeling—as you call it—that I wish Lucienne to take her place here

as my granddaughter, with her children as my great grandchildren."

"Notwithstanding her atheistic father—and her vagabond of a husband?" murmured Gaston between his teeth.

"The blood of the Crespys is pure enough to wipe out all stains," she replied, holding her small head up in the air.

"Quite so—but you are too much a woman of the world not to know that Madame Darlot cannot enter our family under the name of Darlot," remonstrated Edmond.

"I am not a woman of the world any more; I am approaching another world in which society's susceptibilities are forgotten."

"Why not give your name to Madame Darlot?" suggested Gaston ironically.

"I had thought of it—my father would advise it himself. He would be the first to tell me to give back to Lucienne the love of which I deprived her mother."

"You owe nothing to her," bitterly retorted Edmond, "and we confer great honour upon her by admitting her into the family."

"She is much more capable than any of you of guiding her own life." The Dowager showed evident signs of impatience.

"Very well, then, she will consent to our conditions—which are imperative" concluded Edmond.

"Lucienne is a Crespy, and she will understand what her new position imposes on her. I shall rejoice at my granddaughter's return to religious sentiments; for I believe it to be necessary for us all to have a strict discipline of life and that religion ought to guide all our actions."

"Luncheon is served." The sonorous voice of the butler closed the conversation, and the two men left the room together.

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"Any news since we left Paris?" asked Gaston as Gertrude and Hélène sat down at the tea-table loaded with sandwiches, cakes, and sweets. The room was

cosy, the warm tea and succulent dainties brought back the colour to Hélène's cheeks and a smile to Gertrude's lips. The last few days had been very trying: the sudden termination to Paris gaieties had thrown Gertrude into a sullen humour, and Hélène into constant fretfulness, which the chilly journey had not helped to dispel. But the conversation on topics which were of daily interest in the capital revived their spirits, and they chatted away about all that had happened during the last twenty-four hours in their dear Paris, where in less time than that Governments are made or unmade, reputations destroyed, geniuses discovered, and great artistes hurled to the ground. They were full of small incidents which were momentous to them; and their hand-bags were brimming over with visiting cards, letters of invitation to teas, dinners, and suppers.

"You are so good at answering letters and declining invitations Gertrude. Here's my list," and Hélène threw the bundle into her cousin's lap.

"Imagine, Edmond," said Gertrude as she stuffed another sandwich into her mouth, "Vallorbes was seen supping at Maxim's on the night of Aunt Valérie's funeral."

"Oh, it was so little of a funeral—no invitations—a small Mass in a side-chapel, and a railway waggon," and Comtesse Hélène giggled as she devoured a *brioche*.

"I saw Noirmont yesterday," broke in Gertrude. "He tells me that Henri de Terrac has left Yvonne de Laya. She has Paul de Surval in tow now. She was seen having tea with him at Ritz!" Gertrude, notwithstanding family quarrels and bereavements, maintained her right to be the purveyor of gossip.

"You know that Roland de Laya has left for Mentone?" asked Hélène of her husband.

"I know he is running down the hill as fast as he can," murmured Gaston, putting up his eye-glass to choose a cake for himself.

"Sure to end in a lunatic asylum," remarked Edmond with pomposity.

"A pity that such a gifted man should end in that way," solemnly retorted Gertrude.

"Poor devil—well, they are well matched, those two," and Gaston laughed as he swallowed a cup of tea and wiped his moustache with a little napkin.

"Ha! ha! but Marie has had the last word—trust her, and she is watching over the wreckage of her love as a bird of prey gloats over the decomposition of its victim." The Comtesse Hélène enumerated the engagements which, owing to this death, they could not fulfil, and the fancy ball at the Marsys in the Easter week, and the Comtesse de Barye's supper party at the Elysée Palace; without counting next month's automobile trips at Chantilly, and the picture exhibitions. It was like turning a knife round in their hearts to recall all that they were missing; but still to talk of Paris was better than nothing; they believed for a moment that they smelt the fragrance of the Bois de Boulogne, and heard the inspiring call of motor-car trumpet; their talk of the rue de la Paix, and of the overcrowded rooms at Rumpelmyer brought home to them the effervescing intoxication of a place which may be either a paradise or a hell, according to the size of one's purse and the nature of one's appetites.

When they withdrew to their own rooms, each couple began immediately to discuss the subject which occupied them all—the legacy.

"What need had she to unearth that offspring, when she had never looked after it until now?" crossly said Hélène to Gaston, as she took off her hat and jacket. Whilst in Gertrude's room Edmond was putting the situation before his wife and urging the advisability of putting a good face upon it.

"Not satisfied with covering us with shame during her lifetime, she casts upon us, even after her death, mud and ridicule!"

"This is silly," Edmond retorted to his wife's bitter sally. "It would be wiser to welcome her into our family than to exclude her from it; we have tried that once, and it did not prevent the evil."

"It seems to me that all the advantages will be on that person's side," H  l  ne had remarked, as she donned a tea-gown in black chiffon.

"We must not forget, my dear H  l  ne," answered Gaston, "that we have children. One can never tell what may happen to the little Darlots."

"There is no doubt," argued Edmond when his wife returned from her dressing-room, "that had we surrounded Aunt Val  rie instead of cutting her off from the family, our children would have benefited, partially at all events, by this fortune."

"Who ever would have imagined that Aunt Val  rie would hide with such modesty a child of hers?" and H  l  ne laughed ironically.

"Yes; most unlike her devilments and cynicism," answered Gaston.

"When they came down to dinner that evening, every one agreed that it was the wisest thing to do to welcome this new cousin whose mother they had neglected. They had allowed these six millions to slip through their fingers; and they were not only bitterly sore with their aunt for depriving them of their expected legacy, but they were also vexed with themselves for having missed this opportunity of acquiring, for their children, of course, more riches. The only thing now to be done was to leave no stone unturned to gain an influence over this new relation. Would it not be most beneficial to her also? Placed in a false position, she would seize the hand that offered to drag her out of it. Born nowhere, educated at the wash-tub, was it not logical that she would jump at the offer, and step into her gilded frame with as much alacrity as her mother had danced out of it?"

Of course the scandal with Laya was mentioned. It was doubtless a cloud in the golden sky; but was it not a blessing, if scandal there had been, that it was at Laya she had set her cap, and not at any dreadful village bounder.

"After all, Laya is a man of the world!" said Gaston, in a tone of vindication.

"With an array of mistresses whose number rivals

that of his own ancestors," replied H  l  ne, nestling amongst the cushions on the couch.

It was certain that Lucienne was beautiful ; Gaston pulled his moustache at the thought of her ; Edmond thought she had, when he had last seen her, lost a little of her brusque manner ; and H  l  ne believed that under her guidance in matters of toilette, and under Gertrude's training in social etiquette, their cousin would turn out a success. She would take her to Reboux for hats, to Doucet for frocks. How amusing to take about an ignorant and docile cousin, with six millions ! And then the task of rescuing a soul from democracy was not without charm during this season of mourning, and by the time autumn had brought them back to town, all would be ready ; the house which Lucienne would inhabit, her complete trousseau, her visiting list, and Lucienne's final enthronement in society would be achieved by the new year.

Gaston had been right ; H  l  ne was all excitement at the prospect of initiating her cousin into all the secrets of Parisian elegance, whilst Gertrude was planning a whole curriculum of social education suitable for their new relation. The two men, seated in the smoking-room after dinner, after their wives had gone up, pondered over the strange and hidden designs of Providence which had brought amongst them this unknown member of their family.

"If God has willed this *rapprochement* between us and the child of Aunt Val  rie, we must not overlook His divine wish," solemnly remarked Edmond.

"It is a meritorious duty to drag this soul away from democracy and atheism," replied Gaston.

"But mind you, my dear Gaston, we cannot make concessions which would be dishonourable, or which would clash with our convictions or our dignity."

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## CHAPTER XXIII

"READ this letter." Old Darlot took the letter which Lucienne handed to him, reading it aloud in a soft voice.

"What is it?" exclaimed his wife, rising hastily, and reading over his shoulder. "What! millionaire! daughter of a Marquise!" and she seized the letter and sat down. "Well, this *is* news! Ah! my poor Jean; it would have meant rest and comfort for him who worked so hard. But, Lucienne, you don't seem excited!" and she read the letter over again, coming to the end of it with regret. A legacy of six million deserved a longer letter from a solicitor! Turning to her grandchildren. "My precious lambs! You are now wealthy; you will have a lot of gold and a jolly life. Come along, Lucienne; don't look as if you were a mute at a funeral. You seem frightened?"

"Yes, I am frightened!"

"You are mad," exclaimed her mother-in-law, swallowing her cup of coffee. "Marianne! Marianne! come here," she screamed. The servant came in in a hurry.

"You don't know! Your mistress has inherited six millions; you don't know what that means, my child! It means six times more dinners than ever you can eat; six times more dresses than you can wear; and servants and horses as many as you can imagine! Ah! Marianne, my children," and she hugged the children until they cried out. Suddenly becoming conscious of the general silence, she checked herself, looked at Lucienne, and put her hands on her hips. "Well," she burst out at length, "nothing astonishes *you*. One sees that you belong to the aristocracy. It's certain that you were born with a silver spoon in your mouth."

"I would have preferred knowing my mother to having all that money left to me," said Lucienne.



"Indeed! very sensible of you!—considering the amount of love *she* showed you," retorted the old woman ironically, wiping her fat lips with her napkin.

"You will have to go to Paris," meekly suggested the father, filling his pipe; "it is a great responsibility—six millions." His voice trembled. "All that I ask is to be left where I am; my studio is good enough for me. You see, when one is self-made old habits are sweet and old shoes comfortable."

"Could I refuse this legacy?" asked Lucienne, looking shyly at her father-in-law.

"What d' you say?" The old woman had her elbows on the table, and her dark eyes flashed at her daughter-in-law. "You don't mean it! Think of your children. It is true, they are decently provided for; but still, life now-a-days is a deal more expensive than it was in my time. They must have education according to their position."

"Yes, yes," and the little old man rose from his seat in the chimney corner, and came close to Lucienne, smiling sadly. "You owe it to the little ones. They would not thank you later on for denying them that which was their right."

"Always the same argument all round—the future."

"Well, my child, when one has children, it is one's duty to think of them first of all," reprovingly said the mother.

"I do not wish them to live for luxury. All this is very strange, is it not?" and Lucienne laid her head in her hand.

"Don't think too much." The mother began to remove the breakfast plates. "Every one is not like father, who won't change his habits nor his old shoes, and prefers his old dusty studio to a new villa. He is not alone in this world; there are others besides him, who might have different tastes"—a great clatter of plates—"and ambition too." The knives were thrown together on the plates. The noise became louder as the old woman wished to impress on

Lucienne that if her father wished for nothing, the mother *did* expect a good deal.

"My dear parents, of course my first desire would be to make your lives happy, and to give you back in love and comfort what Jean gave to me."

"Now, now, you run away with the idea we want your money." The old mother wept abundant tears, the more abundant as she thought she had brought Lucienne to a saner view of her duties. "You know that we are humble folks, satisfied with little; that we are happy in our modest sphere; besides, we cannot expect to move in the same circle of society as you will."

She seized her husband by the head and kissed him.

"Ah! Antoine. Money will not give us back our son!" The memory of her boy, of their past life, was vivid in her excited brain; and the vision of future comforts opened the floodgates of her emotions. It was like a dream, this legacy, this revelation of a great birth—brilliant position. Lucienne was the heroine of a novel, and heroines are invariably wise and good. She knew her to be generous, and felt sure that the future held untold joys in store for them. She would be the possessor of fine linen cupboards; of a drawing-room—modern style; and a clever general servant at £2 a month. As the visions of a luxurious future rose more and more vividly before her mind's eye, her talk about simple tastes and a stoical life became more eloquent; and the tears came more abundantly from her dark eyes. The children, under the influence of her emotion, began to cry. Whenever they saw their granny gesticulate and weep, they at once began to rampage about the room.

"But, Lucienne, had you ever heard of this Marquise de Vallorbes before?" inquired old Darlot, when his wife had gone out of the room, taking the children away with her.

"Vallorbes." Lucienne pronounced the three consonants slowly.

"Yes, Valérie de Savigny," repeated the old man, taking up the letter to read it over again.

"Ah! it is she! The Dowager was right. It was too late."

"But, then, the Marquise de Savigny is your Grandmother?"

Darlot took off his spectacles and cleaned them with his handkerchief.

"That was the link between us," and Lucienne told him of her first meeting with the Dowager on the night of the ball, and of her begging her to forget the past and to call back her daughter to her side.

"The more reason for you to accept this legacy. You are fond of the old lady."

"Ah! will that proud woman accept me as her grandchild? Will her grandchildren ever love me?"

"Why not, Lucienne? If my brother had left an illegitimate child, would I not have welcomed it as one of mine? The law has nothing to do with questions of the heart."

"Ah! In society they think otherwise of relationship."

"Don't they love as we do?" The old man spoke in a simpering way, like an old child who speaks of things about which he is ignorant.

"They love in another way; their lives are filled with contradictory duties."

"I am too old to understand new ways; but you are young and will adjust yourself to their ways," said Darlot softly.

"But I shall always love you, whatever happens." She took the old man's hands and caressed them.

"I know it, my child; I have always loved you for my son's sake and for your own."

"Imagine, Lucienne!" and Madame Darlot burst into the room with the children after her. "I have just seen the verger at the gate, and they know all about you in the village, and the Marquise's grandchildren have arrived at the Château! I say, what a hurly-burly it will be up there!" She disappeared into the kitchen, and whilst she helped Mariette in the house-

hold duty pictured herself as the happy inhabitant of a villa in the suburbs of Paris.

The old man retired to his own room, and, taking up a lump of clay, he tried to mould a likeness of what Lucienne's mother might have been, humming a song between his teeth, and judging, in his childish heart, all things and all human beings with serene indulgence.

Next day Lucienne entered the Dowager's room.

"You wished to see me?"

"Ah! my child! I half guessed who you were six months ago when you appeared to me on the night of the ball," and she patted Lucienne's hand with her fingers.

"You were kind to me that evening, Madame——"

"I am not Madame any longer. I am your Grandmother, Lucienne; and you are a Crespy." There was in her voice a ring of pride and of authority.

"Do not forget my father," begged Lucienne, whose heart swelled with pride for the great leader of men.

"No—no more than I can forget my father, from whom you inherit your noble sentiments," replied the Marquise.

"Tell me what I am to do." Lucienne knelt before the Dowager and rested her head on her Grandmother's knees. "I dread this new life. I should have preferred her love to everything."

"My child, take what she gives you. It is your duty towards your children, and towards society to fill up the position which will be yours."

Lucienne was silent. The Dowager's words chilled her; she perceived through their apparent kindness, the despotism of a society which would never abandon its prerogatives over her if she accepted a position within it. Her whole being revolted against this family and social domination, although she loved the Dowager, and had been touched by the charm and beauty of a past era which could never come back.

"Dear child," the Dowager held Lucienne's hand in

hers and looked at her, "you recall Valérie to me ; let me give to you what I took away from her—my love. Give me what she might have given to me—a few years of your youth to help me to leave this world."

"May I not love you, as I did before—before this happened ? I fear—the world—I fear—the others." Lucienne clung to the Dowager.

"Why is that ? They are natural guides—given by God."

"But we are not in the same sphere—everything in me will displease them," murmured Lucienne.

"How could that be ?" remonstrated the Marquise. "You are of the same blood. No doubt you have been differently brought up ; but with your intelligence you will soon remedy what may be deficient in your education."

"Life will be different," softly spoke Lucienne.

"Life is full of grave responsibilities, which it is your duty to accept——" Lucienne rose slowly, still holding the Dowager's hand. "My child, think of your children." She touched the small bell that was at her side. "Félicie," as the maid came in, "take Madame to Madame la Marquise's drawing-room," pressing Lucienne's hand. "Go, my child ; they are waiting for you."

At Lucienne's entrance Madame de Savigny rose from her seat, and gravely advanced towards her, whilst Hélène de Laumel, merely nodding, continued to embroider her piece of work. The two men bowed low before their visitor, who sat down near the table at which Gertrude had been working.

The Dowager's health was at first the subject of conversation. Every one had something to say about it, and it helped to break the ice.

Gertrude feared familiarity from this new cousin, and felt she had to draw a definite line between them and this relation springing from the gutter. Edmond, who was in his element, enjoyed the pedantic phrases of his wife, which seemed to him to show a conciliatory spirit, whilst delineating clearly the place

that Lucienne would have expected to occupy in the social and family circle. As to Gaston, he considered all this very solemn—too much like a family council; and in his manner towards Lucienne there was not a vestige left of the insolent irony with which he used formerly to treat her. It seemed as natural to him to comport himself with courtesy towards the woman he accepted for his cousin, as it had before seemed legitimate to show an impudent admiration for the woman he believed to be an adventuress.

But the *banal* phrases and formal welcomes were over, and it was time to come to business.

"My dear cousin," began Edmond, "we must try to make the last years of our Grandmother happy and peaceful. Gaston and I think it advisable, and we all think it right, that you should take the name of Crespy. You are a Crespy, on your poor mother's side." He spoke slowly and severely, as if he were teaching a lesson to a child.

"But—I have a name of my own," softly replied Lucienne.

"Yes, yes—we know——" patronizingly spoke Gaston.

"Quite so," went on Edmond, with emphasis, "but prejudices are very strong in our family, and you could not keep that name."

"We do not blame you for the past. You are not responsible for your past education," sententiously said Gertrude, "but we want to help you to make amends for that past in the eyes of society."

"I do not understand," replied Lucienne.

"Your—marriage—which is no marriage at all—and the state of mortal sin in which your children live—not being christened." Gertrude's voice became more commanding as she approached the subject which had been the cause of this interview. "You will naturally have them christened and send them regularly to the Catechism."

"And we claim the right to bring up your son in the only way in which a descendant of the Crespys

can be brought up : clerical education abroad, then the army," hurriedly spoke Edmond.

"And your daughter," continued Gertrude, "will go to the Assumption Convent, at Ramsgate, where I was educated."

"My children will be free to do what they like when they are of age," replied Lucienne.

Gertrude brought her religious doctrines to bear on her as to the advisability of educating them in the bosom of the Church ; and Gaston, not at all inclined to lose this wealthy cousin, pleaded the cause of her children, with fatherly ardour, enforcing upon her the duty she had towards them.

"If my children, later on, wish to claim their relationship with you, I shall never stand in their way ; but for the present they belong to me."

"But *we* should disown them," cuttingly replied Edmond.

"This is why the responsibility lies with you," coldly remarked Gaston.

"Yes ; in families like ours, the actions of one member reflects on all the others," sharply said Gertrude.

"Your descent is very far back in history ; I come from nowhere ; I have no history, and I have learnt no lessons except those that nature has taught me."

"God forbid !" exclaimed Gaston. "You are a Crespy—and tradition claims you, as it claims us all here."

"No ; my father was of the people, and a democrat."

"Bah ! The democrats of thirty years ago would now be staunch Clericals and Nationalists !" retorted Edmond.

"My first surroundings have greater claims on me. My first youth was spent amongst the humble, the workers ; and for a long time I believed them to be my only family. I have learnt to love life amongst them, and freedom in the open fields."

Hélène lifted her insolent little nose ; opening her

brown eyes wide, and wondering whatever it could be like to live amongst the workers.

Gertrude soon became aware that Lucienne was not as pliable as they had hoped at first, she was therefore determined to break her; and Edmond helped his wife to bring forward all the arguments necessary in such a case, to persuade Lucienne that, outside of their circle there would be no salvation, either for her or for her children. Each one attacked her with their own weapon: Edmond's was a cutting rapier; Gaston used gunpowder to demolish her pride; whilst Gertrude took up the hatchet, declaring war; and Hélène employed the poisoned stiletto, leaning back in her chair, and letting her tiny foot peep out from under her lace petticoat.

Could they be expected to welcome little heathens as nephews with their nameless mother? Had she never realized that individuals were nothing by themselves, but only counted when they were part of a group; and that it was impossible to liberate oneself from the many duties which worked an invisible chain round one? If she was unwilling to come to them under the conditions they had prescribed, well—her children would reap what she had sowed! It was their law, and it was the law of a long lineage of ancestors who had contributed to the history of their country.

"History has no right to make slaves of my children," remarked Lucienne.

"Ha! ha! ha! a well-padded prison, on ten thousand a year," and Hélène stared at her through her glasses.

"You ask too many sacrifices of me," murmured Lucienne, "and I will not, by giving up my name and right over my children, throw a slur upon the man I love . . ."

"Which one?" pertly interrupted Comtesse Hélène as she cut a thread of her *broderie anglaise* and dropped the gold scissors on the table.

Lucienne lifted her eyes towards Edmond, whose expression was that of an executioner.



"Cannot I come to you as I am—free? Why should you impose any rules upon me, and upon my children?"

A silence followed her words, in which the four individuals gathered in this room improvised variations on the theme of Lucienne's perverted mind.

"You will have all the money you can desire," and *all* that it can give you," sneered Gertrude, moving impatiently in her chair.

"There is no doubt that you will do quite well without the sanction of society and of our family," harshly spoke Edmond, who, in his anger, became personal. "You will find, in Paris, much with which to fill your life. . . ."

"And to charm your widowhood!" broke in Hélène, putting her work together, and fidgeting on her chair.

The scene of family conciliation was turning into a vulgar squabble; and wounded pride rankled in the heart of Edmond and Gaston, who had been so ingenuous as to believe that their cousin would accept their conditions unreservedly. Gaston looked up at her with insolent contempt. He was now convinced that his fair cousin was but a nymph of the Bois de Boulogne, and he wondered how he could ever have been so blind as to think for one second that she could adapt herself to the rigid discipline of a highly connected family. "They are all the same," he reasoned, "and the knowledge of her wealth is developing in her the vulgar tastes, which her humble position has kept in check." "God only knows to what depth of infamy she will sink!" thought Edmond. "Set a beggar on horseback and he will ride to the devil!" and Gertrude dismissed the whole subject with that trivial axiom.

"I see that you will not accept me and my children as we are; and as I cannot be any different from what I am we must part." Lucienne rose and made a movement towards Gertrude. "We have nothing more to say to one another."

The two women got up and stared at Lucienne with frigid disdain.

"Well, it must be war between us—as you will not accept our peace."

Edmond walked about the room, hoping thus to evade the necessity of shaking hands with Lucienne.

"Why—war? It is a nasty word," softly uttered Lucienne.

"It is a nasty word for a nasty thing," cuttingly replied Gaston as he leaned against the mantelpiece.

"If you do not choose to be with us—you must inevitably be against us," and Gertrude made a movement towards the fire-place.

"Ah! my Grandmother would understand," Lucienne whispered, smiling faintly, although tears filled her eyes.

"She will be disappointed, to say the least." Edmond gave a look of contempt at the woman who dared to claim relationship with the Dowager, notwithstanding what had passed between them.

"Ah! she will soon get over it!" Hélène could not see the end of this scene without having a last shot.

Lucienne went to the door without any one of them making a sign to accompany her. Edmond was too bitterly mortified at having wasted his time and eloquence to do anything but show his irritation. Having reached the door, Lucienne was on the point of turning the handle, when Gaston, giving way to a natural feeling of admiration for a lovely woman—or may be remembering a little of his good breeding—came up to her, and opening the door, murmured—

"I sincerely regret what has happened."

The door closed upon Lucienne, and Hélène burst out in loud laughter as she dropped on the couch.

"Ha! ha! ha! and this is your Nymph? My poor Gaston! Well, we have been done!"

"We have just escaped nursing a serpent in our breast," retorted Gertrude.

"Bah! she is merely a woman who will find her level on the Paris flags," exclaimed Gaston, laying his hand on Edmond's shoulder. "My dear Gertrude,

you were rather severe," and Gaston turned to his cousin, whom he thought the most unpleasant woman on earth.

"Not severe enough, my dear Gaston," snappishly answered Madame de Savigny, as she moved about the room, putting chairs in their places, flattening lace antimacassars over the backs of them, and shaking the cushions on the couch into their shape, "with these sort of people, one must show one's teeth."

"She is rather of the people, your Nymph; don't you think so?" Hélène looked at her husband through her half-closed eyelids. "We've only seen her in the country; she might have been perfectly impossible in a Paris drawing-room."

"My dear Hélène, what a riddance." Gertrude put away her work.

"Yes—perhaps even Doucet could not have turned her into anything presentable!" Hélène started up, and holding her skirts with her two hands, she skipped about the room, humming a music-hall ditty. "I'm off! I choke here; I feel as if I had spent hours in a workman's home!" and she ran out of the room.

"Well, Gaston, what do you say to all this?" asked Edmond when Gertrude had gone out of the room.

"Ha! ha! I say that Madame Darlot is our Grandmother's last craze; she can be added to the long list of her books."

"Hum!" replied Edmond, "but, like all this subversive literature, Madame Darlot leaves a nasty taste in one's mouth," and the two men walked out of the room together.

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## CHAPTER XXIV

"MONSIEUR LE MARQUIS ! Monsieur le Marquis !" Félicie rushed along the passage after Edmond and Gaston.

"What is it, Félicie ? Speak," said Edmond to the Dowager's maid, as she came up to them panting and puffing from the speed at which she had been running.

"Ah ! Monsieur le Marquis ! Madame la Marquise is very bad ! I sent for—Doctor Besnard—I found Madame—la Marquise—doubled up—in her chair—she could not speak—it must be a—fit." The maid gasped out these broken sentences as she hurried along beside Monsieur de Savigny and Gaston to the Dowager's room.

A few moments later the Doctor came in, and the Dowager was laid upon her bed, which had been pulled into the room so as to facilitate the nursing.

"Some great emotion must have caused this," softly whispered the Doctor, as he stood with Gaston in the recess of the window.

"My Grandmother has had a great shock—her daughter's death," replied Gaston.

"Yes—I know ; but this was three days ago. With her constitution she ought to live to a hundred."

Edmond was disinclined to tell the Doctor about Lucienne's relationship with them. Had she behaved as they had hoped, they would no doubt have spoken openly to Besnard about it. The conversation of Lucienne would have been a gratifying event, and to some extent a feather in their cap ; but since the affair had turned out as it had done, silence was the best policy.

Gaston agreed with his cousins that Aunt Valérie's death and Lucienne's importation into the family circle had been too much for the enfeebled constitution of their Grandmother ; and her brain had given way under the strain.

"It's strange that this should have occurred just

now," remarked Gertrude ; and then, as she suddenly recollected that Lucienne had been with their Grandmother a short time before, she pursed up her lips and whispered to her husband, "No doubt that woman vexed Grandmother—be sure of that," and she passed into the adjoining room to interrogate Félicie.

"Was Madame Darlot a long time with the Marquise ?"

"Only twenty minutes, Madame la Marquise."

"Strange !" went on Gertrude. "But then, how long after her departure did you find her in this condition ?"

"Oh ! more than an hour afterwards, Madame la Marquise. I came in, as I usually do, at six o'clock, to prepare Madame la Marquise for dinner."

Doctor Besnard stayed to dinner. The meal was a broken one, for neither Gertrude nor Hélène would sit down to it comfortably, but they went in by turns to their Grandmother's room and, while one stayed to watch her, the other took the opportunity of getting something to eat. When the young men were left alone with the Doctor, they eagerly inquired of him as to his diagnosis of their Grandmother's condition. They spoke in mysterious monosyllables, for they felt the shadow of death slowly descend upon the house. Even the servants seemed to be infected with the general feeling of solemnity, and moved about still more noiselessly than usual, handing the various dishes which were betaken of sparingly, as the occasion seemed to demand ; for any idea of feasting seemed incongruous at such a time, and under the portrait of the Dowager, in her pink satin dress and white lace scarf. Although everything went on much as usual, still there was a *nuance* observed in the service.

As soon as the critical state of the Dowager had become known, Gertrude de Savigny had given orders to Victoire to take two courses off the menu, and to have the middle chandelier in the dining-room only half lit ; whilst she had sent word to the gardener not to put any flowers on the table. These were

mere details, certainly, which made H       and Gaston shrug their shoulders, whilst Edmond smiled with satisfaction at his wife's sense of propriety ; but Gertrude attached great importance to the minutiae of life. They constituted for her the decorum of life, and influenced the characters of those who, by their exalted positions, were living examples to the rest of the world. She had a complete code of what was suitable or unsuitable in cases of illness, deaths, births and marriages ; and was in her element when ordering what was to be done in emergencies. It was her only way of putting some sort of excitement into her eventless and unromantic life. The small details of daily life were landmarks which indicated the events, joyful or direful, which interrupted the routine of their existence. One of the very first things which Gertrude did whenever some sad event befell the family, was to take off her rings and to lay them on her dressing-table before coming down to the meal which was to assemble the members of the family. It was as natural to her to do so, as it was natural to the verger to strike the ground with his staff when leading a wedding party to the vestry, or a funeral procession through the Church.

After dinner they all went to the Dowager's drawing-room. Gertrude had thought it the right thing to do, to sit a while in this old-fashioned room—it was close to their Grandmother's bedroom ; and the stiffness of the furniture, the dimly-lighted lamps, together with the associations which the family portraits evoked in their minds, made it the fitting place for a family who were grieving over their Grandmother.

“Ugh !” shivered Comtesse H      , close to the fire. “This is more than ever the family vault.”

“H      ,” reprovingly said Gertrude, “remember that your Grandmother is lying unconscious in the next room.”

“It is just for that reason that I should prefer to be a little further off,” and H       checked a violent desire to laugh.

"Well, Doctor"—Gertrude rose as Edmond and Besnard came in—"how is the Marquise?"

"About the same, Madame la Marquise; the left side is paralyzed. There are signs of the speech coming back."

"She is quite conscious," added Edmond, "she nodded to me, as if she wished to say something."

"Yes," said Doctor Besnard, holding his chin in his hand reflectively, "she seems to have something on her mind; her eyes looked round the room, then rested on the door, as if she expected some one to come in."

"She is evidently haunted by the memory of her daughter," gravely said Edmond, bowing his head and lowering his voice at the mention of death. The single lamp—for Gertrude had ordered only one to be lighted—threw streaks of light across the room: on the bottoms of curtains, on the Dowager's empty chair, and on the small Empire table, from which Gertrude had removed all the books, to place them in a book-case of which she kept the key.

"Perhaps it would be advisable to call in Monsieur le Curé before it is too late," said Edmond.

"Very likely our Grandmother is anxious to see him," added Madame de Savigny, rubbing her hands.

"That would explain her persistent glances towards the door."

"Of course, Madame, this is a question which rests with you and with Madame la Marquise. But there is no immediate need to call Monsieur le Curé, for the patient may live two, three, or perhaps even four days."

Owing to the critical state of the Dowager it was arranged that the Doctor should remain all night at the Château, and Gertrude had a room prepared for him, where he could rest until his services were wanted in case of any emergency. The Doctor had particularly prescribed perfect quiet in the sick-room, in which the patient had now dropped into a benevolent sleep.

Gertrude and Hélène remained the first part of the night in their Grandmother's room; speaking in whispers; moving about on tip-toe; sometimes coming up to the bedside to lean over the small body lying on it, and peer into the contracted face, whose eyes were closed; sometimes going to the fire to draw together the bits of log and to place a fresh log carefully on the burning embers.

Hélène was the first to show signs of uneasiness; she yawned and stretched her arms above her head.

"Hélène, go and rest," murmured her cousin, who never felt fatigue when her services were required. This was not because she loved to be of use, but because interference was the principal trait in her character; and in any great event she enjoyed being able to say afterwards, "I was there." Hélène, on the contrary, was invariably worn out whenever any duty was to be accomplished, objecting that the wretched state of her nerves forbade her making any strenuous effort.

"You really don't mind if I go to bed?" Hélène rose languidly, and her white form flitted through the obscure room like a white cloud across a dark sky.

Towards three o'clock Edmond and Gaston came into the room.

"I think it is no use your sitting up any longer, my dear Gertrude," said Edmond, leaning over his wife's chair; "go to bed."

"Reserve your strength for later on," added Gaston, and the two men remained alone, seated opposite to each other, at either side of the fire-place. They hardly spoke; a few words here and there, without moving or raising their voices. Edmond stared at the fire with a frown on his forehead, holding his hands in front of him to shield his face and to warm his chilled fingers; Gaston leaned back in his easy-chair, his feet on the fender and his eyes closed.

"I say, Gaston, did you hear anything?" said Edmond in the early morning.



"What is it? Oh, I have been asleep!" and Gaston sat up in his chair listening.

"I heard a groan, didn't you?" Edmond rose, took the small lamp in his hand, and approached the bed. He looked at his Grandmother, who was staring at him. Her right hand was moving nervously; at times dragging the sheet towards her, at other times coming down on the bed in thumps.

Gaston came to his cousin's side.

"She has something to say which she cannot get out," whispered Edmond.

Their two faces, lighted up by the lamp, appeared fantastic in the room full of shadows. The Dowager's features bore the impress of a mental struggle beyond her physical powers. Her eyes pierced through the darkened room, towards the door; then turned to Edmond, looking up at the two men with the pleading anguish of a dumb animal.

"Go and call Besnard," murmured Monsieur de Savigny. Silence reigned in the room; the Dowager, immovable, stared at the door out of which Gaston had gone, and Edmond, holding the lamp over the bed, watched every change on his Grandmother's face.

The door was opened gently, letting in the Doctor, followed by Monsieur de Laumel. The Marquise fixed her eyes on the former, and on Gaston, then she looked behind them at the door which a servant had closed from outside. The Doctor took her hand gently within his, and tried to attract her attention; but her eyes were fixed on the other end of the room, and a last effort brought to her lips the name that had been in her mind, and which her contracted throat had not been able to utter.

"Lucienne!" In the silence of the night, in this faintly lighted room, this paralyzed body coming suddenly to life made the three men turn to one another. They all knew who the Dowager was thinking of.

"Can we do anything for you?" softly asked the Doctor, leaning over the bed.

"Lucienne—Lucienne!" again broke through her contracted throat, and the hand came down on the bed in heavy blows.

Deep lines furrowed Edmond's forehead. "Do you think, Doctor, that she is recalling a painful scene?"

"I should be inclined to believe that she is anxious to see—some one." Doctor Besnard spoke in whispers, hardly moving his lips.

"Lucienne!" This time her voice had the old commanding tone, and her look the former authority which had kept her family in check for so many years.

"Of course, my dear Grandmother, she will come," soothingly said Gaston, laying his hand on the pillow.

She gave him a suspicious glance. Did she distrust those who had already deceived her as to her daughter's condition? She turned her looks towards the doctor, who stood on the other side of her bed, and after a supreme effort she said—

"Monsieur le Curé—want to see him."

"Certainly, my dear Grandmother; we shall send for him at once." Edmond was relieved at his Grandmother's second thought, and rejoiced at her sensible wish to see the man who could, better than any one, bring some comfort to her troubled mind. Since she had expressed her desire to see the Abbé Martin, she was calmer, and her hand ceased to fumble with the bed-clothes.

"How do you find your patient?" gravely inquired Edmond of Doctor Besnard as they left the bedside and stood in the middle of the room.

"It is very difficult to say anything in such a critical case, but considering the wonderful constitution of Madame la Marquise, no fatal issue need be apprehended within the next thirty-six hours or so."

Do you see any objection to her receiving extreme unction?" devoutly asked the Marquis.

"Madame la Marquise is perfectly conscious, but I should not advise any strain on her mind and speech,"

and they both left the room, whilst Gaston called Félicie to prepare the room for the reception of Monsieur le Curé, who would no doubt arrive very soon.

A little later they all—with the exception of Hélène—assembled in the Dowager's drawing-room anxiously awaiting the entrance of the Priest, who had been already more than an hour with the old Marquise. At last the door was opened and the Abbé Martin walked in. He came forward and bowed to Gertrude, his hands folded under the wide sleeves of his cassock, and with the dignity which this important interview lent to his manner.

"I trust our Grandmother is not overwrought after this long confession, Monsieur le Curé?" inquired Edmond as they sat down.

"Madame la Marquise seemed better at the end of our interview than when I went in." The Priest's voice was less uncertain than usual, and his attitude had acquired some vigour from the powerful individuality with which he had communed for more than an hour.

"Our Grandmother laboured under mental agony at the fear of not being able to receive extreme unction," spoke Gertrude, rubbing her hands together.

"Her death will be a very exemplary one in these troublous times, when atheism is the order of the day," solemnly said Edmond.

"Her life has been a remarkable one," added Gaston, who could never take part in his cousin's morbid contemplation of death. He recalled some of the Dowager's clever sallies, adding that there were few like her left in their world, with such originality of mind, and of such an age as to be able to refer back to the eighteenth century for their personal reminiscences.

"It has always been her wish to be buried in the Crespy cemetery, and we intend to make this ceremony as impressive as possible, to strike the simple minds of our peasantry." The Curé's eyes flashed up

at Monsieur de Savigny with all the revolt which his humble condition inspired in him against this haughty member of the aristocracy, but his lips curled up at the corners partly from satisfaction at the thought of forthcoming Church fees, partly from pride at the prospect of officiating in this important ceremony—the first, since his installation in Crespy, at which he had officiated. His face showed signs of mental fatigue after his long interview with the dowager; for although he felt honoured at her choosing him for her confession, still, he had undergone a severe trial during his meeting with a woman who always had made him sensible of his own insignificance, and with whom he felt awkward in consequence, but he had left his timidity in the sick-room, and appeared composed and dignified with the Savignys.

After a deep silence, during which each one was haunted by thoughts which they did not dare to express, the Curé was the first to speak.

"Madame la Marquise has expressed a wish to see Madame Darlot."

"Oh, an old woman's fad!" exclaimed Edmond, who bit his lips as soon as he had uttered the words. The Curé looked at Edmond over his eyeglasses.

"What do you advise, Monsieur le Curé?" hurriedly asked Gaston.

"It seems to be very natural; besides, a wish from a dying person is a command." The Priest felt in his element as God's minister and master of the situation, since he stood amongst them as the interpreter of their dying Grandmother. All the pent-up class jealousy which was hidden in his peasant's heart was revenged on this day, when they had to listen to this humble shepherd raised to the position of family counsellor. He was not sorry to dictate duties to the Marquis, who so often had wounded his pride, and to remind the Comte de Laumel that, although descended from a humble family, a Priest was a

personage who commanded respect and whose speeches were not to be insolently interrupted as the Comte was so often wont to do. Edmond drew himself up, frowning, Gertrude twisted the long black chain round her neck, and Gaston looked ironically at the Curé through his eyeglass.

"The position is a very awkward one," harshly said Edmond.

"A most unpleasant one indeed," haughtily added Gertrude.

"Do you really believe this wish of my Grandmother's to be anything else but a valetudinarian's caprice?" Gaston took the whole thing lightly.

"Besides, this interview with a person who can only recall painful events may be fatal to our Grandmother's health," peevishly retorted Gertrude.

"Yes, I think Besnard ought to give his opinion on this, for he recommends perfect quiet to his patient," and Edmond rose and went up to Gaston.

"Madame la Marquise was positive in her wish to see her granddaughter." The Curé spoke with irritation, fidgeting his hand under his wide sleeves.

"But the position is quite altered," harshly said Edmond.

"The patient's wish remains the same, whatever the position may have become," replied the Priest. "And it is my duty to carry out the last wishes of the dying."

"The Marquise has asked you to——"

"To beg Madame Darlot to come as soon as possible to her bedside," interrupted the Priest, who rose from his seat and bowed to Edmond.

Evidently it was wiser to accept the thing as it was, and not to dispute with the Priest, who represented in their eyes the spiritual authority to which they were all subjected.

"And you are going to deliver the message to Madame Darlot?" asked Gaston, who leaned against the chimney, pulling at his moustache with vexation.

"I imagine it is the only thing to be done," replied

the Priest, who looked up. "I hear Madame Darlot has decided to leave the Farm in a few days."

"For good?" interrupted Gertrude.

"I think so, Madame."

"Would to God she had departed sooner!" brusquely said Edmond.

"Well, if we have to go through this last trial, let it be soon over." Gaston made a movement, which was followed by Gertrude, and the Priest, taking the opportunity, bowed to her.

"Madame la Marquise is no doubt anxious to see her grand-daughter," concluded the Abbé Martin, who left the room satisfied at having shot an arrow at the Comte de Laumel, whose patronizing insolence he could not bear.

"Félicie, you had better look in sometimes and keep a sharp eye on the knick-knacks in the room."

"Oh! Monsieur le Marquis can rely upon me—I have locked up everything that is any value," answered the Dowager's maid, who had come into Gertrude's drawing-room to report what was going on in the room where Lucienne was at her Grandmother's bedside. The maid did not understand what this person was doing in her mistress's room, and at a bedside at which her legitimate grandchildren ought to be by right. Her thirty years' service in the Dowager's household gave her, as she believed, the right to judge and disapprove all that was going on in the family. Very often she went beyond the limits of discretion, and had to be pulled up by Gertrude, to whom she showed a somewhat off-hand manner; whilst she treated Monsieur le Marquis with the jolly consideration with which an old and trustworthy servant treats a young master.

"Did the Marquise seem pleased to see *her*?" inquired Gertrude.

"Madame la Marquise stares at her and holds her hand," answered Félicie, with scorn.

"And does—the other—say anything?" asked Edmond, looking up from reading the newspaper.



"How long can this uncertain condition last?" asked Gertrude, who feared that she might have to alter some of her arrangements.

"I hope, for one or two days yet, Madame la Marquise."

"And—that person?" objected Edmond, biting his moustache.

"Madame la Marquise wishes to keep her by her side." The Doctor's voice was firm, although his manner was respectful.

They bowed their heads before the Doctor, whose manner seemed to concord with the desire of his patient; and they followed him in silence to the sick-room with the solemnity suitable to this occasion.

As they came in, Félicie was piling logs in the hearth as a pretext for remaining in the room and observing Lucienne, who was kneeling by the side of the Dowager, holding her hand. The latter drew her hand back when her grandchildren entered, and Lucienne rose to her feet and came forward to greet Gertrude, but the latter, after merely nodding to her, approached her Grandmother's bedside and arranged the sheets, and raised the pillows; in fact, performed the little duties which showed that it was her place to stand there to counteract the pernicious influence of Lucienne; just as she had formerly neutralized her Grandmother's revolutionary opinions by reading to her at stated hours articles out of right-minded reviews and newspapers.

"Well, granny!" and Comtesse Hélène passed brusquely in front of Lucienne without looking at her, and lightly kissed the Dowager on her forehead.

"How well you look! Quite coquettish in your nightcap!" She tied up the strings under the old lady's chin, spreading out the ends like the wings of a white bird. Then she skipped away to the mantel-piece and arranged her hair in the mirror.

The Dowager had no hand pressure for any of them, nor had she any longing glances for the two



women who stood by her. She looked towards the window where Lucienne was with the enigmatic stare of a Sphinx who embraces the past and the future in one long gaze into eternity.

Lucienne was watching the burning rays of the setting sun reflected in the winding river like liquid fire. The long curtain of poplar trees, clearly drawn against the red sky, trembled at the touch of the wind, which bent the branches, on which hung thick clusters of mistletoe. This glorious ending of the day filled her heart with the emotion one feels for all things that end ; and she instinctively turned her head away from the window and looked into the room. Her eyes met those of the Dowager, which had been fixed upon her for some time.

The deep glow of the sunset passed insensibly from an opalescent hue to a mauve tinge, dwindling away into a pearly grey sky, across which flitted light pink clouds resembling tufts of cotton wool pulled by invisible fingers.

The awkwardness of the present situation disappeared with the grandeur of the spectacle around her ; and all the mean jealousies of those who wrangled over their prerogatives at the sight of a corpse vanished away, as did also the fussy suspicions of a menial who had erected herself into a family policeman, guarding the body against the approach of outsiders as she had protected silver combs, brushes and knick-knacks against a thief.

Lucienne, in her reverie, did not notice the Savignys and the Laumels leaving the room one by one ; and she stood in the recess of the window watching the shadows gathering round the bedside, where the Doctor was giving his instructions to Félicie.

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## CHAPTER XXV

THE room was once more dimly lighted with a shaded lamp placed on a table, leaving in semi-darkness the side of the room where the bed stood.

Every one had retired, tired out ; Gaston and H  l  ne had gone to bed ; Edmond and Gertrude, without undressing, were lying down in their room, ready to spring up at a minute's notice. They all considered it wiser to rest the body, even though their minds were not at rest ; for they were bitterly annoyed at having to give way to their Grandmother's last wish of keeping Lucienne beside her. If it had to be endured, then they might just as well make use of Madame Darlot to nurse their Grandmother during the night, whilst they reposed for a while. F  licie, whose room was close to the Dowager's, had also reclined on her bed, and was very soon fast asleep.

All was still—with that thrilling stillness which dulls our senses ; and Lucienne, seated near the fire, recalled that other night, when she had sat immovably watching the features of the man she loved, and who would never more look at her.

Every now and then she would rise and approach the bed where the Dowager lay with her eyes gazing into space. On one such occasion, when Lucienne had stood for a few moments by the bedside watching her, the old Marquise made a movement with her hand, and after an effort said—

“Open—drawer in desk.”

Lucienne obeyed, and brought out a bundle of papers, which seemed to have been thrown into the drawer in a hurry.

A deep sigh of relief broke from the feeble, old body of the Dowager, and her eyes lighted up with a last flash of satisfaction.

"Read!—read!" Her fingers nervously dragged the sheet towards her.

Lucienne sat down at the table where the lamp stood and opened a bundle of letters. The first ones were signed "Valérie"; another packet of letters were signed "Pierre." She read the latter first; they were all impassioned letters, written when he had been abroad or staying at his country house with his wife and son. Then she turned to her mother's letters, and here Lucienne recognized the dauntless spirit and lack of equilibrium of which the Dowager had so often spoken to her. But the letters also revealed a disinterestedness in her character and a thirst for idealism of which the Dowager seemed to have been ignorant. The letters gave evidence of the mental conflict of two noble souls who had been, for a time, united in perfect love; but in Pierre's letters, the eloquent expressions of a sincere passion were intermingled with the bitter outbursts of a man who had sacrificed most of his energies and genius to a political party which misjudged him; and, towards the end of the correspondence, melancholy spread a thick veil over a passion which every day and every hour was decreasing in power. His last letter was a short appeal, and each word seemed to have been written with a sob. He sent all Valérie's letters back to her, begging her to bury in ashes all this wild romance which had already ruined the life of one woman—his wife—and which would injure another—their child—if these letters ever fell into the hands of some one inclined to ruin her. He confessed his weakness in his disability to destroy her letters; but she would be braver, no doubt, and would, for the sake of her daughter, annihilate every proof of their reckless passion. But Valérie had not had that courage; and here remained every letter which contained the overflowing of her heart. Lucienne wondered why her mother had not done what her father wished her to do.

She put the letters together, tying them up with the

string that had dropped on the carpet. There was not a sound in the room and not a sound outside. How strange that she should be here, reading her father and mother's letters. The words seemed to burn themselves into her brain, and the sobs which had come from these two hearts still rang in her ears, and reminded her of another tragedy—that of Roland and Marie. They had all suffered, and no doubt screamed in the agony of their hearts. These letters were full of the world's injustice; of this emptiness of politics, to which Pierre had given his life; they were full also of a noble love which the world condemned, and which had ended in the sacrifice of two souls to the conventionalities of a social life.

She noticed that a few loose pages were lying on the carpet, and she was going to put them away with the rest, when she heard a sound from the bed. She hastened to the bedside.

"Read—read—Valérie's letter—to me." The voice sounded terrible in the silence of the night. "My pride—is broken—it is my—punishment—child."

"Oh! my darling Grandmother," exclaimed Lucienne, bending over the little face, "what punishment could you deserve?"

"Read—aloud—my penalty . . ." and the aged features were contorted under the stress of mental pain and effort.

Lucienne sat down again at the table and gathered up the loose leaves of paper. They were all mixed and some upside down, but owing to the leaves being numbered, she easily put them together and began to read out loud.

It was the human document of a heart in revolt against life and society, shrieking out a last insult. Valérie had laid her heart bare, cynically, tragically, even brutally. She tore to shreds the abject comedy of social life.

"I know the tragic incident of my birth, my mother—I had been struck by lightning of passion—and for

ever was I to suffer from the first impress of destiny on my brow. Ah! my mother! How lovely are those lives well padded all round, and protected from the outward dangers! You healed your wounds with the help of those who loved you, and who were your supports during the first years of your life; but from *your* life you carefully excluded me. Oh! I quite understand that I must have been odious to you, and must have recalled so many terrible things to you. But the result of that estrangement between us was not what you might have expected. It is strange how little it takes to incline the scales towards hatred instead of towards love! I astonished you as a child, and the others, my brother and sister, feared me. How often have I watched you hesitating to punish me, in the fear lest my violent rage would break the quietude of your family life. I deserved punishment, I know; but you feared my temper, and you considered it very noble on your part to spare me the penalty of my misdeeds, although you never tried to soothe my outburst of violence by taking me in your arms. What an abyss of misery is a child's heart? and how little are his screams and tears compared to his minor lamentations and silent sobs. It is what a child does not say that lies deepest in his little wounded heart. Had you opened your arms to me, you would have held in them the most docile of all your children, the most tender, and certainly the easiest to lead. But your reticence with me was the first stone you laid towards building a barrier between us, and which has since risen so high and become so strong that our two hearts—admitting that we have any—are now for ever separated. You never troubled yourself about my mental wants, and only gave me a very little of your intellect, whilst my brother and sister treated me with their contempt. The wishy-washy stuff that is given as mental food to a well-bred young girl was too insipid for me. My brain was hungry for stronger aliments, like yours, my mother; but you took no heed. You may be a very remark-

able woman, many have told me that you are ; but you are lamentably ignorant just where a simple peasant would have known better. One does not give water biscuits to those who crave with hunger. It is true, I was one of those impetuous creatures who asked for many things—perhaps would sometimes ask for the moon, but sometimes also only for a caress ; but all the answer I got was that the moon was too far off, and that naughty children were never caressed. It was the irony of my life, that I cared for nothing nearer than the moon ; and I could not be anything but a naughty child.”

Lucienne stopped. She heard a moan in the silence of the night, which was answered by the screech of an owl in a tree outside.

“Read,” said the voice coming from the bed.

“To calm my longings you gave me a puppet as a life companion ; and to assuage my thirst for noble things you threw me a ducal crown as a toy. Ha ! ha ! ha ! Then suddenly everything was changed. The puppet disappeared, the ducal crown vanished ; and I was left alone, young and beautiful, with every capacity for the enjoyment of life, and with no one to love me. I threw myself into a vortex of pleasures ; into politics and art. I had many intrigues, besides some mere fancies ; but as yet I had not loved. A great singer, a famous artist, a drawing-room poet worshipped me, and I condescended to come down from my cloud to amuse myself. I turned every man’s head, but never lost mine. Then, one day, I came across a great love—as mad as it was noble, as disinterested as it was exacting. I met Pierre at a well-known house one evening. I had heard about him, and often wished to know him. When we met, it was at first a mental *coup de foudre*—a brain-duel, in which each of us hurled at the other the best we had in our hearts and minds. I discovered in my soul treasures of which previously I had known nothing. I had known myself to be an enchantress, with a craving for enjoyment ; but I suddenly discovered that I had a heart !

Pierre came to see me next day, and I knew for the first time what the love of a superior man could be. Until then I had only known the sterile pleasures of intrigue. I had not believed in love, because it had never come close to me. All at once I met it face to face, and it carried me away on its eagle wings to the highest spheres. I gave myself up unreservedly to Pierre, hiding from the world my bliss as long as I possibly could. I had not formerly showed such prudence in my amorous escapades; and my lovers had rejoiced at a mistress who, owing to her recklessness, had thrown over them a halo of notoriety. They loved me perhaps more for my indiscretions than for my charms, for to be my lover was no doubt delightful; but to be known as such was the making of a man, socially and artistically. As soon as I knew Pierre, I was touched by the great magician's wand—love. My whole being was transformed through the inner flame which burnt in my heart; and I crouched humbly at the feet of the man who was my master.

"I threw myself into active politics to help him, and inspired many of his speeches in the Chamber of Deputies. We spent long nights discussing the fate of a modern France, of which he with his complex nature was so true an incarnation. But the brilliant edifice of a modern France, as understood by our two souls enamoured of political idealism, disappeared under the stones of conflicting parties, and Pierre became sick at heart. I was as much his friend as his mistress during that time; but I was surrounded by enemies, men and women.

"Pierre's wife was not one of the least. The democratic party suspected me of trying to win over the great Tribune to the high class to which I belonged. On the other side, the aristocratic circles accused me of desertion. They were ready to condone my eccentricities and intrigues—artists and poets had been put into this world to be a source of amusement to women of my rank! But when I did more

than amuse myself—when I loved—then the outcry was general, and I became, in their eyes, a social rebel. But I cared little for what the world thought or said, for I had touched and heard the chord of happiness which sang melodiously in our two hearts.

“After a few—alas, too few—years of that perfect union, the serpent crept in amongst the roses; and the man who had carried me away to the high regions where no mortal could reach us, began, little by little, to measure the distance between Olympus and the earth; and finally brought me back slyly to reality, so that I might not suffer too abruptly from darkness after the dazzling light. Ah! the first premonition that land is near is cruel! To feel the ground under your feet after having floated amongst the clouds is a bitter moment. And to feel around you the limitations of daily routine pressing hard, and to know that very soon you will be but a mere social machine whose sole mission is to grind life, aimlessly and joylessly, fills your whole being with revolt.

“Olympus was transformed into the neatly-trimmed alleys of the Bois de Boulogne, where I had learnt the mean hypocrisies of a world in which my Jupiter was chained. I had to clip my wings and to watch the best of my soul wither away. Ha! ha! ha! Jupiter condemned to social *bavardage*! That is a thing that teaches one life’s calisthenics! I have since practised on that social trapeze rather recklessly; and I have broken my neck in the circus of life. I am dying, sick unto death—a good deal from a cancer, but certainly also from life disgust. It was not that Pierre loved me less; but he remembered that he loved his son, and desired to surround that young life with the respectability which our *liaison* had injured.

“He preached prudence to me, although he did not speak of breaking our intimacy; but I had heard the first call of the tattoo which calls back to order



those who stroll in the lanes of happiness. We took a last trip in Italy, and then returned to Paris; Pierre more preoccupied and more disgusted with politics than ever; and I more in love than ever. Soon after our return Pierre died suddenly, and I shut myself up to give free course to my despair. Violent was my despair, and the more violent in that it was so complex. So many causes had contributed to my life's failure, now all had crumbled around me; and the sadness of the future would be no less bitter than the wreck of my past had been. I knew he had died from disappointment; and my seeming love for politics and of public affairs was really but the expression of the love I bore him. I wept bitter tears over him, and I wept bitter tears over myself—over the failure of my youth. Ah! why had I not been wedded to a man like Pierre? I had only tasted of bliss to make me thirst for more. When I met love face to face it had been only to find out that it was but the mask of happiness. Decidedly life was only a masquerade! and when I realized that truth I woke from my dream—cured. I made up my mind to be the chief attraction in the circus of life, and it was then that I launched into the financial world. I was still very beautiful; my wit had acquired a pungency, a reckless cynicism, which made all men in quest of mercurial wit run after me; whilst my judgment had become sounder as I had lost all personal interest in men and events. I had lovers—I always should have lovers, for I was a woman whom a man could not see for half-an-hour without wishing to possess—and, by the end of an hour, any man would be either my lover or my enemy. I was desperately determined to astonish the world as I had been as a child to astonish you and my brother and sister. I became very rich, owing to my financial friends; and when the Dreyfus affair burst over France I regained some of my old political notoriety. It was an opportunity of vexing my old aristocratic *milieu*.

"Then I had some *slav* blood in my veins, and notwithstanding my cynicism, I discovered at the bottom of my withered heart a little of that chivalrous spirit which made me take the part of the weak against the strong. I was blinded for a time by my ephemeral glory; and when I regained my vision, it was to see that my mother's door was closed to me for ever. That was the last scene of life's carnival; and you, my mother, had laid the last stone to the barrier which you began to erect between us when I was a child. It was all over, and I stood alone, in the arena like a clown hissed off the stage by a howling public.

"I am leaving you my legacy—not money, oh dear no; you are too high-minded to accept a legacy earned in shame! My legacy to you is in flesh and blood, and it will not soon die out, for my daughter has two children; and the race of social rebels will continue to flourish and to throw mud over the barrier that stands between us. Lucienne is not an ordinary woman . . . I saw her once, at a picture-dealer's. She is beautiful, and looked radiantly happy; but she needs a proper frame to set her at her proper value. I wish to set that pearl in diamonds. When I saw her I felt no maternal thrill; no, I only weighed and measured all that she could bring to the social market. She could do nothing without the power of wealth; and I am giving her that which will enable her to astonish Paris. She has my blood in her veins and that of Pierre, the dauntless and passionate man who died of grief.

"Her life, at least the first act of it, has been a failure. She will know better next time, and choose a more fit companion. I at least never had any illusions about my puppet, not even for twenty-four hours; but I hear that she took her bird for an eagle! If she ever dreamed of glory for her poor artist, good God! how bitterly she must have suffered! You will perhaps object that I might have gone to her in that great trial. I thought of it, and then I thought

better of it, and respected her despair. I had for so long closed every issue to my heart, that I could not bring myself to give up my good habits of selfishness. Besides, I had the decency to respect her grief, and did not wish her to come in contact with my cynicism. It was the last feeling of purity hidden in a corner of my heart.

"Lucienne will be my last challenge to the world, to your world, my mother: and she will not fail in her mission as a rebel. I die with a curse on my lips. I have waited day after day, since this last illness, for a word from you, But it was impossible, no doubt. The barrier you built between us stood too high for you to see me, and too thick for you to hear my moans.

"I die like the gladiator who falls vanquished in the arena, and I am at last hissed off the stage! Adieu!"

The last words were spoken inaudibly, for the sobs rose in Lucienne's throat. She leaned her head on the table and wept for the woman whose life had been a long cry, and also for the woman whose pride had been broken by this last insult from the child she had so completely misunderstood. Lucienne realized what cruel agony her Grandmother must have gone through before she had brought herself to give her this letter to read, carrying the penalty so far as to have it read aloud to her.

Neither spoke; and Lucienne's sobs alone were heard in the silence of the night. Already a narrow streak of light filtered through between the narrow opening of the curtains. It was the lurid light of the morning struggling with the darkness of night. The fire had gone out.

"Let in—the dawn——" the Dowager pronounced with effort.

Lucienne went to the window, drew back the curtain, and opening the window threw back the shutters. The birds were already awake, and called one another from tree to tree, with the exultant joy

which fills their throats at that early season of spring.

Having closed the window she came and knelt at the side of the bed :

"Oh! my darling Grandmother," she softly murmured. "What tortures you have all gone through! What agony it has all been, which might have been averted! Why did not my mother allow me to go to her? I would have loved her and reunited you to her sooner." Her cheek was laid on the hand of the Dowager.

"You have reunited us, not here, in the next world." The voice was still clear, though less strong; and the eyes were gradually losing their brightness and acquiring that glassy lustre which distinguishes not outward objects any more.

"Ah! now I know what held me chained to Cressy!" murmured Lucienne. "It was you—it was our mysterious link. I had to know the truth about my mother; and to . . ."

"Help me—to die," interrupted the Dowager.

Lucienne laid her head on the pillow close to the wizened old face in its white nightcap; and she whispered to her Grandmother such pathetic and endearing words as a mother murmurs to her sleepy child. The strong individuality of the young woman, her physical and mental vigour, lent a last flash of life to the poor little body whose soul was flickering away like the lamp on the table, which flared up once or twice and finally went out.

Lucienne heard close to her ear these words in broken tones—

"May God—forgive me—and forgive them. Teach your—children—how to love—we have hated—too much."

Lucienne tenderly kissed the drawn skin of the forehead, and smoothed the wrinkled eyelids over the eyeballs. It was between them the last leave-taking at which no one was to assist; and between this fragile being and the healthy creature at its side

there existed at last one accord which none would ever break.

"Open small—drawer in—desk—Valérie's miniature—keep it."

Lucienne went towards the desk, but seeing the sheets of her mother's letters on the little table, she went to it, and taking up carefully all the papers, she tore them up one after the other into shreds, and threw them into the wastepaper-basket. The crackling of the papers attracted the attention of the Dowager, who moved her head slightly towards Lucienne, a last ray of consciousness brightening her expression.

When Lucienne came back to the bedside, holding the little velvet frame in her hand, she leaned over her Grandmother.

"Do not forget—my father—you have—his noble character," the voice faltered. "I only—see the past. You will know—the future"—with a last supreme effort the hand held the counterpane with muscular force. "We have—hated too much; the old world is finished—you—incarnate—the new one."

Lucienne, kneeling down, pressed her lips to the little hand which crumpled the sheet in its contracted fingers.

They remained thus for some time, Lucienne murmuring soft words which the Dowager heard no more. Then the hand moved, and was lifted and laid on the head of the young woman, and the feeble voice articulated with difficulty—

"Forgive—me—Valérie."

Lucienne felt the pressure of the hand, and dare not make a movement, until the pressure relaxed and the hand slipped on to the sheet. She heard a gurgle in the throat of the dying woman, and looked up; the eyes were fixed on her, showing no sign of recognition or consciousness. It was the end. She rose at once, and rushed into Félicie's room, telling her to go at once and call Edmond and Gaston, and

then she returned back to the room, and standing at some distance from the bed, she looked at the face whose eyes were still fixed on her, and waited for the others to come.

They came in, one after the other, in silence, for they knew that the last hour of their Grandmother's life had struck. They stood round the bed; the two grandsons at the head of it watching with tearless eyes that last struggle between death and muscular semblance of life. The two young women stood side by side at the foot of the bed, evincing no sign of emotion. To Gertrude, death was one of the numerous functions of life; and the habit she had of social conventionalities helped her to accept this last duty with the same officialism with which she sat at the head of a dinner-party. Hélène, only half awake, and half clad in the harmonious folds of a white tea-gown, was watching this long adieu with the frightened pout and frown of a child who fears the darkness. Lucienne, still standing away from the bed, kept her face buried in her hand, stifling the sobs which rose to her throat as she heard the gasps which escaped the convulsed breast of the dying woman.

The Doctor, holding the little pulse within his fingers, looked at his watch; and all watched his movements with intensity, their anxious eyes going from the dying face on the pillows to the placid features of the man who stood by the bed. The choking sounds diminished, the intervals between them were longer, until they finally stopped. The Doctor closed his watch with a click, and replaced it in his waistcoat-pocket. It was over. Edmond lowered the eyelids over the glassy eyeballs, which had ceased to view life's miseries, and all knelt down and joined in the prayers for the dead.

Then they rose, and slowly walking towards the door entered the drawing-room. It was dark. A servant came in to open the window. The daylight flooded the room in which the Dowager would never

more sit in her easy-chair. The red globe of the sun was rising above the horizon in the grey, cold sky. The birds warbled in their nests, piercing the morning air with their sharp whistle, whilst the cuckoo, with his persistent call, beat time to the love-song of the nightingale.

Lucienne, standing before the open window, inhaled the chilly atmosphere of a spring morning. Her heart was sorrowing for the woman who lay in the next room, but her eyes drank in the beauty of the majestic scene in front of her, and her soul thrilled at the songs of love which filled the throats of birds.

She heard not the muffled voices of Gertrude and Hélène, at the end of the room, as they talked in low tones to one another, whilst they shivered with the fresh air which came in through the window. Nor did she notice that Gaston had come towards her. He was at her side, and she turned round.

"Madame, could we reiterate our offer?"

"We thought"—Edmond had followed Gaston—"that our Grandmother's death-scene might have touched you."

"It has touched me more than you will ever know," interrupted Lucienne, "but not as you think."

"We offered you support—honour," went on Gaston.

"I cannot accept slavery," she answered softly.

"Then it must be war; you will have it so," said Edmond bitterly, as he drew back.

"No; I brought you love," replied she, "but there cannot be any love without freedom."

"You mean rebellion," and Edmond sneered, whilst Gaston shrugged his shoulders.

She looked once more at the sun, which continued its ascent in the sky, and walked towards the door leading into the passage. For a moment she held the handle in her hand. The two women were still conversing, and took no notice of Lucienne.

Edmond and Gaston stood still watching her open the door. On the threshold she turned round, and with a faint smile on her lips she said—

“Your children and mine shall love one another.”

THE END



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